

Fallout

by Radont

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Summary: ONI is getting ready to deploy a new weapon. When things go bad a group of four Spartans is disbatched to resolve the situation.

1. Dead Spartans

It should have been a good day. School was done for the summer, the sun was bright and warm overhead and in his backpack was a report card that proudly boasted straight A's. Despite life's best attempts to spread cheer, the twelve-year-old walked alone with his head hung in despair. Each step was heavy and slow as if he had to coerce his sneaker clad feet to move. To him, summer wasn't a time for playing or a time to visit friend's—summer was a time of pain, a time to get 'stronger'. He didn't want to be strong anymore, all he wanted was a normal childhood, was that too much to ask? The brown haired boy rounded a bend in the paved road.

There it was.

A medium sized brick house in a medium sized suburb sat close to the road. As he drew near his heart threatened to jump straight out of his chest. _Could it be? Is he really not here? _Then he saw it, an old rusting blue pick-up truck parked in the short driveway. The boy stopped, feet refusing to move. The slight hope that had worked its way into his mind vanished like a wisp of smoke in the wind. _Come on, if you're not home on time it will only make it worse._ Grudgingly, slowly, he urged one foot in front of the other until he stood outside the intimidating solid oak door, his hand gently squeezing the polished handle. Turning it slowly the boy eased the door open and peeked inside.

The entryway was empty, beyond that was the equally unoccupied kitchen. Stephen took a deep breath and slipped into the house. Setting his bag down gently he crept slowly across the tiled kitchen floor, skirted the edge of an old table, and peered through the archway leading to the living room. There he was, asleep as usual

with four empty beer bottles on a short wooden table next to the couch. The TV was on and a local anchor was making a rundown of the daily happenings in the world of professional sports.

Stephen's puppy, a recent gift from his dad, came bounding into the room tearing at a multi-colored rubber ball in a fruitless attempt to get the squeaking object to surrender. Upon seeing the boy standing in the kitchen, the black Labrador dropped the ball, cocked his head sideways, then let out a yelp of happiness. Fear and despair seized the boy as the real reason for the new puppy became apparent. It wasn't a gift of love or a gift to offer him companionship; it was, in fact, no gift at all—it was an alarm. His father had gotten tired of him sneaking into the house while he lay passed out in front of the TV, the dog would assure him it never happened again. Stephen could still remember the pure elation he felt when he first saw the dog. He remembered thinking that things would change, his dad had gotten over his mother's death and things would be normal again. The crushing disappointment of the revelation was enough to make his knees buckle; he stabbed a hand out to the wall to keep from toppling forward.

The trembling boy watched in horror as the man on the couch, his 'dad', was roused. Two intense blue eyes turned their steel gaze on Stephen. A scowl formed on the sleepy Italian face.

"Were you sneaking in here again, boy?" His father raged as he stumbled towards the kitchen. The big man glanced at the clock. "Ah thought ah told you t' be home quickly." His words were slurring as he drew near, casting an imposing shadow over his frail son.

"I-I tried, father, but—"

He couldn't finish the sentence; a powerful hand smacked the side of his face sending him reeling to the carpeted floor. Metallic tasting blood flowed warm and unhindered over his tongue. He stifled a sob; it would only make his father angrier if he cried.

"Git up!" Mark Marioli yelled as he grabbed his son and yanked him off the ground, "only a weak fool shtays down after the firsht hit, do you want to be weak the rest of your life?"

Another powerful blow sent the boy to the floor again. Mark leaned in close and stared intently at his son, waiting for him to start crying, waiting for an excuse to unleash his fury.

"I'm jus' tryin' t'make you stronger. Them teachers don't teach that at school so they?"

Stephen shook his head. Marioli picked his son off the floor by the collar. "I expect an answer when I ask a question!" He drew his hand back for another strike; Stephen threw his arms up to shield his face from the blow. Mark dropped his son to the floor.

"Pathetic." He turned and stumbled back to the couch. Diomed, the black Labrador, licked the boy's bruised face in an attempt to comfort him. Stephen smiled through his tears and petted the dog's soft head. _I'll always have you, won't I?_ As if in response, Diomed climbed into the boy's lap and laid across his legs, head resting on Stephen's arm.

For three summers Stephen endured his father's beatings, for three summers he was a helpless, defenseless victim. The fourth summer was different. It started normal enough; Stephen came home on the last day of school expecting to be hit. He wasn't disappointed. But there comes a time when healing wounds refuse to be torn open any longer. Instead, they scar, and eventually turn into unfeeling, uncaring calluses. His father stopped beating him, not because of any conscience he may have possessed, but because abuse ceased to be an effective means of control. The city became Stephen's playground, and breaking and entering was his game.

He learned what made floorboards squeak and how to avoid them. Very few locked doors were able to resist his picking and even the most rusted hinges would silence themselves at his command. The sixteen year old didn't break in to steal—he used it as an escape. The rush of adrenaline that came with successfully infiltrating and exfiltrating an occupied house was enough to sate his adventurous thirst. In his spare time Stephen joined as many self-defense and martial arts classes as he could and quickly impressed every sensei he learned from. He was a machine—cold, emotionless, and lethal. And yet through all of it, Diomed wouldn't leave his side. The dog was a warm soothing fire in the middle of a harsh winter; the only friend to a boy who had given up on friendship. To Stephen, Diomed was the last thread of innocence left from a life that had long since deviated from a happier path.

His first kill came two years later, the target slept as Stephen arranged the 'accidental' death. The coroner would say too much alcohol mixed with candles is never a good combination and pass it off as an unfortunate accident. He would wonder, briefly, if the deceased would be missed.

He wouldn't be. Child abusers rarely were. As the flames hungrily gorged themselves on the house's innards, Stephen stood outside the range of the orange glow and watched. _See you in Hell, dad._ A month later the empty shell joined the UNSC. He needed weapons training, and who better to teach him than the men and woman that kill for a living. Four years later, Stephen Marioli vanished.

* * *

>Smoke always hung thick in pubs where ONI employees took their breaks and ate their lunches. Most complained that the allotted time given for the afternoon break was too short, forcing them to ingest the burgers, fries, and sodas too fast causing all manner of afternoon health anomalies. Some people never learn to drop the grease and order the menu items with the little apple symbol next to them instead.<p><p>

To Ivan Kazlov though, an hour for lunch was plenty of time. The grey haired rebel spook glanced at his watch then worked on the salad in front of him. _Five minutes late, this is the last time I hire this arrogant fool_, he grumbled as he stabbed a cherry tomato with his fork. The spy smiled crookedly to himself, it would be the last job Jason did for _anyone_. It was too bad really, Kazlov hated to send men like that on suicide missions. Not that he cared if the merc lived or died, he just didn't like to waste talent.

Ivan had hired many assassins in his time, all of which possessed of varying degrees of competence. None of them had the reputation of

Jason Matthews though. With reputation comes rumors and rumors generate the stories of legends. It was said that Matthews had single-handedly killed three Spartans in hand-to-hand combat. Killing one Spartan was improbable, two was impossible, and to take on three of the super soldiers, well, just having their anger directed at you would be fatal to most men.

The windowed door to the pub swung open, letting in a shaft of sunlight that fell over tables and patrons. Kazlov glanced toward the entrance, the new arrival was in his late twenties, early thirties maybe, short but well built. Jason Matthews was about as remarkable as the salad sitting on the spook's plate, perfect for blending into places he shouldn't be. Sunglasses hid the merc's eyes, when he removed them Ivan nearly gasped. The temperature of the room seemed to drop ten degrees, Kazlov was sure everything his potential employee looked at would turn into a solid block of ice. He had seen cold, piercing eyes before but they might as well be his mother's compared to the pair now moving towards him.

The suit-clad mercenary eased into the dimly lit booth without so much as a nod in greeting.

"You're late," Kazlov remarked without bothering to hide his irritation.

"So I am." _What are you going to do about it rebel, _he didn't add.

"Let me get one thing clear, you are going to work for _me,_ and I will not be so casually disregarded by my own employees. You may have a reputation for small petty crime where you're from but here in the big leagues actions speak louder than words." He was sure he'd hit the mark, every mercenary considers himself to be the best and would not take an insult lightly.

"Fair enough," was the cold, emotionless reply.

Kazlov barely contained his shock, "Yesâ€¦ goodâ€¦ on to business then." The spook lowered his voice and leaned forward slightly. "For the last decade rebel geneticists have been working on turning some of our own soldiers into Spartans. I will spare you all the technical details, you wouldn't understand the in's and out's of the program anyway." It was a low blow, Kazlov knew, but this merc had to be proud of _something_ or have _some_ emotion in him. Jason remained stone faced. The spook continued, effectively hiding his disbelief. "Six months ago we successfully created our first soldier. He's not trained yet and it will be quite some time before he gets used to the improved strength and speed but we are ready to start the next phase of the program, we need MJOLNIR armor."

"So build it," Jason suggested.

Ivan chuckled slightly, "It is far too advanced for any of our scientists. If we had a full suit of it though we may be able to copy it, or at least start to develop our own version." They couldn't build them, of course, but if all went well they wouldn't need to. All Kazlov needed was a few Spartans with some exposed skin; the virus would do the rest.

"You rebels are all the same; all you want are dead Spartans."

"No, we don't want them dead; we want them brought in alive. Four of them." He studied Jason's face to discern any signs of emotion. Nothing.

Kazlov had heard rebels say they weren't afraid of the legendary super soldiers, but behind the words, behind every pair of lying eyes, their very souls quaked with fear. The man sitting across the table was different. No nervous glances, no shifting eyes, just an unwavering gaze that spoke for itself: Spartans had died by his hand. Probably not three at a time, but somewhere Jason was hiding a MJOLNIR helmet, a trophy not many hunters can claim.

"I can't just walk into ONI and drag four Spartans out."

"No," Kazlov replied, "you can't. Which is why I have taken the liberty of finding them for you." The rebel slid a folder of documents across the polished table. Jason flipped through them while Ivan continued, "our friend's at ONI are developing some sort of bio weapon, specifically designed to wipe out the Covenant without damaging any structures. They're researching and building it on the planet Ajax, it's remote and small. There are mainly scientists there, naturally, a small group of marines, and four Spartans."

Jason finished looking over the documents and closed the folder. "It's doable."

"I can spare a thousand soldiers; they will attack the base directly while you come up from behind. I know you are gifted in the areas of stealth, you'll need those skills there."

Jason nodded.

"I thought you'd agree. I went ahead and picked out the soldiers for you, they'll be ready when you are."

Kazlov leaned back; this was going better than he had first anticipated. He expected some sort of challenge, some kind of arrogant display of, "I work alone, you're soldiers will only get in my way." But the mercenary kept it civil and businesslike. It was unnerving really; a man with a casual attitude towards killing was hard enough to control. When someone was apathetic to taking lives they would just as soon kill the person that sent them. Money's alluring voice fell on deaf ears when dealing with these kinds of mercs. Offer them a challenge or offer them nothing at all.

"I can offer you a hundred million up front for your services and a hundred million more upon successful completion of the mission." He could offer him the entire planet and it wouldn't make a difference, Jason Matthews wasn't coming back from this one. What Kazlov underestimated was the mercenary's intelligence, offering that kind of money up front set off alarms in the trained killers mind. There was more to this mission than getting MJOLNIR armor and he would find out what it was.

"That'll do," Jason said as he stood, picked up the folder, and exited. He needed a drink. Not alcohol though, he never touched the stuff. Water would be fine. The pub emptied onto a busy sidewalk in downtown Hawking, a city reminiscent of Earth's New York. The city

was just hitting its stride for the day, drivers honked angrily and people walked briskly. Three blocks away and down a back alley was a small convenience store, Jason let out a sharp whistle and a black Labrador fell in stride with him as he headed down the sidewalk.

A bell jingled above Jason's head as he entered the small store. The teen behind the counter smiled politely, "I'm sorry sir, we can't allow pets in the store."

Jason didn't argue, "My apologies," the merc bent down to scratch behind the dog's ears and whisper a command. He stood again and opened the jingling door; the Labrador obediently walked out, sat, and waited patiently. Satisfied, Jason flashed a forced smile to the clerk and proceeded down a narrow aisle to the coolers on the back wall.

Grabbing a bottle of water, Matthews turned to head to the front when the door jingled again. A sweatshirt clad teenager entered, hood pulled up over his head and hands stuffed in the shirt's front pockets. Normally the merc wouldn't think twice about a kid in a sweatshirt, but it was summer and over eighty degrees outside. _Great, some punk getting drug money._ The mercenary ducked behind a display of Pringles as the youth quickly scanned the room. Satisfied the store was empty he pulled a small caliber handgun from his sweatshirt and demanded the young girl running the register give him all the money it contained.

Jason poked his head around the display; the cashier behind the counter locked eyes with him briefly, something not many people could do. _You're brave, kid_. Tears began to glisten in her blue eyes as she handed the money over with shaking hands. Matthews had two choices, he could sit back and let fate decide the outcome by itself, or he could get involved and help fate make up its mind.

If he sat back and did nothing someone might die, which meant there would be police involved. Maybe the assailant was professional enough to not panic and stay cool. Probably not. The young criminal glanced nervously through the window to the street, paced restlessly in front of the counter, and held the gun in a quivering hand while shouting commands. He was anything _but_ professional. On the other hand, if Jason taught the punk a lesson the young girl behind the counter would be happy that she wasn't dead and wouldn't call the police at all.

Jason stood, he didn't like being considered a hero, but he liked talking to the police even less.

Unscrewing the cap on his water, the mercenary took a long swallow, returned the cap, and moved casually towards the front. The cashier glanced at him then back at the gunmen then back at Jason. _Stop looking at me, you'll tip him off._ One more glance and the youth got it, he turned quickly but Matthews had covered the last few meters in a sprint, with momentum and surprise on his side the merc batted the pistol away with an outstretched arm. The young cashier, eyes wide with fear, ducked behind the counter. She heard a sickening snap of bones, a scream of pain, another snap, and finally a muffled thud.

The door jingled and the cashier stood slowly, a five dollar bill was lying on the counter, lying on the floor was a young teen writhing in

pain, his wrist and elbow bent at awkward angles. She quickly glanced out the window but saw only the brown bricks of the adjacent building. Maybe there _were_ good people in the world.

* * *

>Back in the pub, Ivan Kazlov finished his salad and leaned back, a smug smile cracked across his face. He glanced down at the ONI I.D. badge hanging around his neck bearing his picture and the designation: Barry Klemens, Geneticist.

"Well Barry, I think it's time we parted ways."

The spook plunged his hand into his front pocket and procured a cell phone. After punching in a number and hearing the party on the other end pick up, Ivan spoke briefly.

"We're on for tonight."

The line disconnected without a word. To the patrons of the pub, Kazlov might have just confirmed a date with his wife, or a business meeting with a prospective contractor. In reality he had just condemned the only ONI employee with enough intelligence to catch the bug in the Spartan program before the rebels had a chance to exploit it. At this stage, even if he did find it, it was probably too late to do anything about it. But Kazlov didn't care what was probable, he wanted assurance, and so three assassins now waited patiently outside the ONI building. _Three should be enough, how hard can it be to kill one scientist?_

2. Defects

Author's note: I am aware that there is a Gray Fox in the Metal Gear universe. My brother also uses the name Gray Fox when he plays Halo, that's why I use the name in this fic; I'm not doing a Halo/Metal Gear crossover.

Rain fell in grey ribbons from a starless night sky; splashing without prejudice on paved roads, sidewalks, and soldiers. The UNSC marines, crouched with their backs to a five-foot high stone wall, shivered. Opposite the grey stone barrier and across a seventy-five meter courtyard stood a large house; proudly defying the disarray that had ravaged the rest of the city. The rain wasn't so bad if the soldiers were tactically advancing through the bombed out ruins and exchanging fire with rebels down narrow streets. Keeping track of snipers in destroyed houses would keep any soldier warm. Standing in a torrential downpour at 0200 hours would make the devil himself long for the warmth of his domain.

Not all of the soldiers were cold, Radont's MJOLNIR armor regulated the environment inside his suit, and he found himself pitying the shivering marines. All but one, anyway. Sergeant Abraham Winfield could freeze for all he cared. The sergeant knew tactics as well as anyone else. It was his disregard for life, including his own, that made him hated by the men under his command. They were all expendable, just more assets to move around.

The op had started successfully enough. The landing zone just outside the city of _Krenz_ was void of hostiles and the small squad of UNSC

soldiers penetrated two kilometers into the city before engaging any rebel forces. If the rebels tried to take cover in one of the many long abandoned buildings, Sergeant Winfield wouldn't bother hunting them down. He let rockets do the talking, and there is no way to negotiate with a 102mm High-Explosive round. Sometimes they found the mangled bodies of woman and children mixed with the appendages of the rebels. Winfield called it a part of war. Radont called it murder.

"Spartan, on my mark I want you to empty your rockets into that house."

I have a name, sir. "Yes sir," was the reply from behind the mirrored visor.

"Mark!"

Radont stood and shouldered the rocket launcher. The house was old, Victorian style, with black shingles effortlessly shedding the rain. A house that size probably belonged to some rich entrepreneur before the war, now the red bricks housed rebels—or so Sergeant Winfield thought. Radont squeezed the trigger gently but froze before releasing the rockets. Something moved in an upstairs room. Through the sheets of rain the Spartan's enhanced vision could clearly make out a dark haired woman comforting a small child. Fear was etched on each face. This wasn't a rebel hideout; it was the last stronghold for civilians in a war-torn city. He eased his finger off the trigger and crouched behind the wall.

"What do you think you're doing, Spartan?" Winfield fumed.

"Sir," Radont replied calmly, "there are civilians in that house, not rebels."

The sergeant narrowed his eyes and clenched his fists tight enough to turn his knuckles white. His voice started low pitched and quiet but grew louder with each word.

"I don't care if your own mother is in that house, when I give an order I expect it to be followed. Is that clear Spartan?"

Radont threw the heavy weapon at Winfield's feet. "You do it."

An uneasy silence followed broken only by the soft, methodical slapping of rain hitting wet pavement. The marines shuffled nervously and checked their assault rifles. _No one_ talked to Sergeant Abraham Winfield like that, let alone refuse a direct order and then throw down a weapon.

"Fine," Winfield said as he picked up the rocket launcher, "I'll show you how a _real_ soldier takes care of rebels, then I'll make sure this is the last op you're ever a part of."

The sergeant hoisted the weapon to his shoulder and peered through the scope. His hand went to the trigger but paused when he heard an M225 semi-armor piercing round being chambered with cold indifference. He glanced to his left, what stared back was an M6D pistol held in steady, gauntleted Spartan hands.

"I can't let you do that," Radont said with an uncanny coolness.

An arrogant smile crept across Abraham's lips. "It takes guts to pull a weapon on your CO, I like that." Winfield returned his attention to the scope. "Unfortunately you're gonna have to shoot me because".

His ears didn't even have time to register the telltale crack of the pistol firing.

The lead bullet penetrated his skull half an inch above his ear. The high explosive round detonated, exploding the sergeant's head like a can of tomato soup. Skull fragments and grey matter assaulted the stone wall as the body slumped to the ground. The resulting puddle of crimson blood mixed with rain and formed a long red river that snaked its way down the rough paved road.

Nobody moved.

After a few moments that felt like hours, the marines put aside their shock and surrounded the steel colored super soldier. Radont let his gun slip from his hand, arms raised in submission. Someone walked close behind him, the Spartan knew what was coming and he offered no resistance.

"I'm sorry, Radont." The soldier said.

"I'm not," was the reply.

Half a second later the solid stock of an assault rifle smacked the back of his head. The ground rushed up to meet him as the world faded into blackness.

* * *

>Paul Jensen sat back in his plush office chair. He stretched his hands up and released a deep yawn. A glance at the tall grandfather clock in the corner let him know he'd been in the office too long. Seven hours already? Paul stood to stretch his legs, it felt good to stand and work his joints on the soft office carpet. A walk outside wouldn't hurt either. Seven hours of staring at genetic codes and DNA strands would make even a hermit want to take a walk. The ONI geneticist removed his white lab coat and hung it over the black chair.

He felt his pocket to make sure his wallet was secure. A quick glance down revealed his I.D. badge was still hanging from his neck. One last sweep of the office and he exited through the translucent glass door, locking it behind him. The head of ONI genetic research should have security on his mind twenty-four-seven, or so his dad's predecessor told him. _Yeah, thanks for the tip dad. _As a former UNSC marine, Paul knew all about security but his dad felt the need to remind him on a monthly basis. Thomas Jensen was like that, always worrying about his son.

Jensen's office exited into a white lab area. Long steel tables reflected beakers and test tubes in a polished sheen. Computers hummed quietly as they processed data from all manner of tests and experiments. He walked briskly past fellow geneticists pouring intently over microscopes and lab result sheets.

Once outside, Paul took an immediate left and headed down the sidewalk. _Maaz_, the star that kept the planet lit, was making it's descent behind him. Shadows stretched long in the waning orange glow as the city settled in for another warm summer night.

Something didn't _feel_ right though. The hair on Paul's arms stood at attention, his heart beat faster as adrenaline began to enhance his senses. It was the natural 'fight or flight' response, something he hadn't felt since being ambushed by rebel forces during his tour of duty with the UNSC.

The former marine stopped and inspected a display window showcasing pin stripe suits. He shot a glance down the sidewalk. Big guy, black shirt and jacket, bald, jeans and white running shoes. The jacket was a giveaway; _nobody_ wore more than a t-shirt in this weather unless they had something to hide. Paul assumed, correctly, that he hid a silenced pistol under the coat. The assassin quickly diverted his attention to a newspaper stand, but not before Paul had all the information he needed. Well, almost all. He didn't know _why_ the lone merc was after him. Not a big deal really, he'd find out soon enough.

Jensen continued down the sidewalk to an intersection. The light blinked a white 'walk' symbol; Paul proceeded across the street, being carefully to maintain a casual gait. A block to his left another black clad citizen did the same. This one was donned in the same style jacket as the first, but he was far younger and fifty pounds lighter. _Two of them? I didn't realize I was that popular._ The geneticist decided to test them; he turned left after crossing the street and headed straight for the smaller assassin.

The young merc didn't skip a beat; he turned and headed in the same direction as Paul. After a block he entered a small Chinese restaurant. He'd be back; most of these buildings had exits into adjacent alleys Jensen continued casually down the sidewalk. A third assassin turned the corner and instantly spotted his prey coming toward him not ten feet away. Paul saw the slight pause followed by a spark of recognition in the merc's dark eyes. It was imperceptible to a civilian, but the trained eye of a marine knew what to look for. The assassin might as well hold up a sign announcing he was there.

It was time to show the mercs who they were dealing with.

At the next alley Paul turned right, hoping the Chinese restaurant had a back door leading here. It did, the door swung open and a jacket clad citizen stepped out. It had to be the young assassin but Jensen couldn't be sure. The towering buildings on either side of the alley blocked Maaz's waning light creating deep, dark shadows. A single streetlight protruding from the restaurant made a valiant effort to dispel the darkness. All it succeeded in doing was putting a small spotlight half way down the alley. If Paul timed it right he would meet the assassin directly under the light.

Perfect.

Jensen quickened his pace. Almost there. Just before stepping into the circle of light Paul sprinted at the assassin in a sudden explosion of speed. The merc's eyes went wide with surprise at the site of his quarry barreling towards him. Reaching inside his jacket,

the assassin procured a silenced pistol and aimed it in one fluid motion. It was too late. Paul pushed the kid's gun arm aside as he fired; the bullet smacked into the adjacent brick building sending pieces of red brick tumbling to the pavement.

Jensen brought his knee to the merc's gut, the assassin doubled over. The former marine went to work on the gun arm. He grabbed the wrist firmly and twisted. Bones snapped, the merc yelled and dropped his weapon. Paul greedily scooped up the pistol and slipped his left arm around the assassin's neck. He held him tightly from behind as he stepped out of the light, the gun trained on the door to the restaurant.

The third assassin busted into the alley from the restaurant, gun raised ready to fire. He had heard the yell of his comrade in the radio attached to his ear. The silenced pistol in the marine's hand whispered twice. Two lead bullets returned wet smacking sounds as they entered the assassin's chest cavity. Paul squeezed his captive tighter; the merc struggled briefly then went limp. One dead assassin was enough for tonight, Jensen wasn't a murderer.

Two down, one to go.

The geneticist quickly crouched next to a rusting steel trash bin and waited for the bald assassin to find his partners. He didn't have to wait long, not two minutes later the soft patter of running shoes could be heard moving down the alley.

The merc slowed when he drew close to the spotlight. His gun was drawn and he took nervous, slow steps toward the bodies. The bald head swiveled from side to side searching every shadow, looking for any movement. Satisfied the area was clear, the merc knelt down and inspected the body of the younger hitman.

Like a viper rising to strike, Paul rose from his hiding spot and moved silently toward the assassin's back. Ten feet out he ran louder so the assassin would hear him. _Stand and turn, that's all I ask._ The merc obeyed, spinning on his heel with gun up. Jensen used the momentum to slam his foot into the assassin's knee, ripping muscles and tearing tendons. The assailant dropped the gun and clutched his knee in agony as he fell to the ground.

Paul kicked the gun away and spoke forcefully, "Who sent you?"

The merc shook his head, "I-I don't k-know," he said between deep breaths.

Jensen fired a round into the assassin's good knee. The merc howled. Paul knelt and pressed the silenced weapon to the writhing man's temple. The merc's eyes widened with fear.

"K-Kazlov. His name is Ivan Kazlov."

Paul allowed a slight grin to spread over his lips.

"Not so tough when you're on the other side of the gun, eh? Why did Mr. Kazlov want me dead?"

"I swear I don't know, he gives me a job and I do it. No questions."

Jensen frowned.

"You believe me, right?" The merc asked in a wavering voice.

Paul slammed the pistol into the side of the assassin's head knocking him out cold.

"Every word." The former Marine stood and disappeared into the night. He had a call to make.

* * *

>Radont tested the shackles clasped firmly around his wrists and ankles, they held tight. Sitting in an interrogation room unable to move was not something he considered necessary. He was a soldier, not a criminal. The whispers and rumors started as soon as he got back from the op. A murderer some said, others were convinced he must have finally snapped. It was bound to happen with what they do to Spartans. In truth he was neither murderer or insane; just a regular person holding on to deep rooted convictions ONI hoped would leave with training. <p>The room was purposefully bland. A long rectangular steel table sat squarely in the middle, the walls were constructed with grey cinderblocks and the floor was a cold slab of concrete. A single dim light hung over the center of the table, it was meant to give the interrogator more options. He could move in and out of the light, distracting and disorienting the prisoner. But when the prisoner is an eight foot tall Spartan the roles are reversed. This time it was the interrogator that left shaking and distraught.<p>

That had been over half an hour ago. The windowless door finally squeaked open. Radont sat straighter when his brother, and fellow Spartan, entered. The legendary Gray Fox grabbed an uncomfortable steel chair from the opposite end of the table and brought it closer to his brother. He sat without saying a word.

When it came to close quarters battle, Gray Fox's skills were unmatched. Radont would have been long dead if not for the quick wits, and even quicker trigger finger, of his younger brother. The Spartan was feared among rebel forces, his name never uttered any louder than a whisper.

After a brief silence Gray Fox spoke. "That wasn't very smart, Radont. You've created quite the mess for the powers that be."

Radont shrugged, the shackles rattled, "I did what I had to do."

How could he be so cold to the whole thing? Gray Fox raised his voice and leaned in, "You killed a father, did you know that? There are three kids and a wife that will never see their father and husband again. You did not do what you had to do, you did what you're convictions told you to do."

"You would have done the exact same thing," Radont replied calmly, "you had the same convictions drilled into you from the time you were born. Even ONI with all their power can't take those away."

"What I would have done doesn't matter." Gray fox replied

"So you would let a house full of civilians get turned into a pile of rubble because of a blood thirsty, over zealous Sergeant?"

Gray Fox's eyebrows came together in confusion, "What civilians are you talking about?"

Radont should have seen it coming; ONI knew how to control the media. To everyone outside of ONI he was just a Spartan that went crazy. Sergeant Winfield was a mourned hero just trying to make the universe a safer place. The talking heads from ONI would assure everyone that it was an isolated incident, no other Spartan was defective. They would use the word 'defective' because it turned Radont into nothing more than a broken piece of equipment. Nobody's conscience ever bothered him or her when disposing faulty machinery.

"Sergeant Winfield ordered me to fire on a house full of non-combatants. He had already butchered enough woman and children in his search for rebels. I threw down my weapon and refused. He picked it up with intent to fire on civilians. Like I said; I did what I had to do."

Gray Fox sat back in his chair, "So ONI twisted it all around. Figures."

An armed guard entered the drab room, "Five minutes is up."

Gray Fox stood, "I'll see if I can pull some strings, try and educate the right people."

"Be civil, bro." Radont replied only half seriously.

His brother smiled, "Always."

The steel door shut and Radont was alone again. His mind drifted back to the last words his father had said to him. _Everyone is born with a purpose; they can't die until they've accomplished it._ It sounded funny to a six year old, but he believed it now. He wouldn't be executedâ€"yet.

* * *

>Paul Jensen opened the door to his house with post-battle shakiness. He entered, closed and locked the oak door, then leaned against it. Deep breathes were drawn in through his nose then released slowly. Once his heart had settled he picked up the phone in the kitchen. Seven digits later he heard ringing. <p>"This is detective Brian Kramer, Homicide."

"Brian, its Paul."

"_Paul!_" The disembodied voice said, _"haven't talked to you in a while, how's life?"_

"It's ah, it's interesting. Listen, I have a favor to ask."

"_Shoot, buddy."_

"Do you have an Ivan Kazlov on file anywhere? I need any information you can give me."

"_Sure thing, give me a sec."_

Paul heard the fluttering of fingers dancing across a keyboard. Brain hummed while he worked.

"_Okay, we have an address here. Looks like he lives on the top floor of Gains Apartments, the big ones downtown. He was charged several times with murder and extortion but nothing ever stuck. Are you in some sort of trouble?"_

"Just the usual. Assassins trying to kill me and all that."

"_Was one of them a big bald guy by chance?"_

Paul paused, "Yes."

"_Well you just saved me a lot of work. We got a call from a Chinese restaurant, said there was some kind of fight going on out in the ally. By the time our officer got there all he found was two unconscious guys and a corpse. You mind coming down and ID'ing them?"_

"I'll be right there." He returned the phone to the cradle. The next few days would be busy ones.

He had an apartment to infiltrate.

3. Old Friends, New Enemies

The blast happened shortly after midnight; Barry Klemens' apartment was consumed instantly in the fiery inferno. The amply fueled flames danced and cracked their way through the adjacent apartments, devouring the wooden interior like a hurricane feasting on an unsuspecting town. Smoke alarms screamed their warnings and drowsy parents hurried sleepy children out of the building and into the warm night. Most made it out safely and watched in horror as their lives burned. The unlucky ones only had time to hear the initial blast before being consumed by an unforgiving force.

It was an acceptable loss; or so Ivan Kazlov thought as he puffed on a cigarette eight blocks away. Each pull on the Marlboro lit his emotionless face in an intense orange glow, casting dark shadows around uncaring eyes. It was done; his last major connection with ONI had been severed. In a few days the authorities would blame a faulty gas line for the explosion that took the life of Barry Klemens, a respected ONI geneticist. The body in the room would be burned beyond recognition. Who would notice one less homeless person wandering the streets? The only thing left to do was getting rid of the files in his other apartment but that could be done later; tonight he would celebrate.

He would miss this life; the high pay that came with spying on ONI and the top floor apartment would linger in his mind like a tumor long after he returned to rebel desk work on some obscure asteroid. It was just one more price to pay for a worthy cause. Like the families burning in their apartments, sacrifices had to be made, even by the true believers like Ivan Kazlov. One last puff of the cigarette and the spook dropped it to the ground, crushing it beneath

a black dress shoe. The rebel then turned and shuffled casually down the lamp-lit sidewalk. _Craig's Pub_ was calling his name.

* * *

>Across the city in the upscale part of town, Jason Matthews was planning an op of his own. He reclined on a black leather couch sipping tea while visualizing the night's upcoming mission. His meeting with Kazlov had gone wellâ€”too well. There was more to this than bringing back MJOLNIR armor, and the only place to find answers was inside Kazlov's head or in his apartment. Matthews decided to check the latter. Rebels weren't known for being talkative; the really devoted ones would die for their respective causes rather than give up information. No, he would not get any answers from Kazlov directly.<p><p>

Infiltrating the top level penthouse of a thirty-story building should be easy enough and it was something he'd done plenty of times. For most, the height of a dwelling was directly proportional to how secure the resident felt. Jason knew it was no different with Kazlov. He was arrogant and enjoyed the lavish lifestyle too much to be bothered by guards. The rebel would have a couple goons outside the door, naturally, but once inside the large apartment Matthews would have free reign of any information the spook carelessly left out.

Jason didn't really care what he found there. He'd do the mission regardless of the devious underpinnings that may be associated with working for a rebel. It paid well and he could be anonymous, a bonus for any merc. What he didn't like was the fact that Kazlov felt it necessary to withhold information from him. Matthews would remedy that tonight then go on to complete the assignment. He had never failed a mission and didn't plan on starting any time soon. Upon successful completion the assassin would get his money straight from Kazlov's hand; then he would execute the rebel. Not because he hated him, but because that's how business was done. Jason had proven he was trustworthy; he had a right to know more about the op he had agreed to undertake. You don't keep information from your employees, especially the ones that wouldn't think twice about putting a bullet between your eyes.

The time for reflecting was over. Matthews stood after downing the last of his green tea and navigated richly carpeted stairs to his bedroom. He exchanged the comfortable fleece pants and sweatshirt he was wearing for a pair of blue jeans and white tee shirt. Once downstairs he moved to the front entryway where a black duffle bag waited his attention. Jason lifted it and headed into the night, making sure to deadbolt the door and activate the security system in the grey brick house.

* * *

>Paul Jensen was doing much the same thing in his medium sized home fifteen miles away, though his motives were different. It wasn't often that ONI geneticists were targeted for assassination. Someone had made the call though, and whoever it was had underestimated him. Which meant, Jensen thought, he was targeted because he was a scientist and scientists are supposed to be weak and timid. Had this Kazlov fellow known Paul's background he would have sent more assassins; or at least sent hitmen with more competence. During his

stint in the Marines, Jensen had fought young inexperienced rebels with more battle prowess than the fools that tried to take his life not seventy-two hours ago.<p><p>

Paul stuffed a black, tight fitting jumpsuit into an equally black briefcase sitting on a small round table. On top of the suit he tossed a silenced pistol loaded with tranquilizer darts instead of deadly lead. He had already killed one man this week and his conscience was at ease only because it was done in self-defense. Murdering someone, whether it is in the name of good or evil, while breaking into their home was a whole different story; not to mention the police wouldn't be as forgiving. Jensen checked the pistol for the twelfth time to be certain the darts were loaded; satisfied, he returned the modified weapon to the briefcase and clicked it closed.

Paul stood and paced around the living room anxious for the phone to ring but dreading it at the same time. Rappelling off a thirty-story building was a lot different than zip lining into a hot LZ. The last thing a soldier worried about when hanging from a Pelican was falling to their death. Generally, they were more worried about the bullets glancing off the thick armor of the drop ship and getting feet on the ground as fast as possible. Dangling from a building was a job for window washers, and even then they had something solid under their feet.

The shrill ring of a phone pulled Jensen from his daydream.

"This is Paul."

"_Hey Paul,"_ the disembodied voice of Detective Brian Kramer said through the receiver, _ "looks like our man is out for a while. Ready to play Spiderman?"_

Spiderman. That's rich. "Ready as I'll ever be. See you in ten minutes."

Paul returned the phone to its cradle and hoisted his briefcase. A deep breath followed by a slow exhale and Jensen was ready. This was Spiderman's night.

* * *

>Jason Matthews was getting impatient. He checked his watch again; it had been thirty minutes since he'd arrived and no one had left the small twenty-four hour pizza parlor. There had to be some fraternity in need of food somewhere in this city; didn't the citizens of Hawking get delivery anymore? Matthews leaned against the rough brick structure again and waited in the dark.

The door to _Mike's Pizza_ opened with an electronic ding. A boy no older than seventeen stepped out, expertly balancing three grease soaked boxes on one hand while fishing in his pocket for car keys. Jason let out a whistle; the boy nearly dropped the pizzas in surprise at the figure that materialized out of the darkness.

"A word please," Jason said coolly.

The boy glanced around, confused. "With me?"

Matthews nodded and the delivery boy approached reluctantly.

The merc reached behind his back, the teen backed away holding up his free hand in submission.

"Whoa, hey man, you can just have these pizzas. I don't want any trouble 'k bro?"

Jason forced a slight smile as he held up three crisp hundred dollar bills.

"I'll pay for those pizzas, your hat, and your silence, _bro_."

The boy looked up dumbly at his official _Mike's Pizza_ hat before handing over the boxes and red cap.

Matthews held out the money, the boy snatched it and stared greedily, his eyes wide. When he looked up again Jason was gone.

* * *

>Paul eased his car into a tall parking ramp building, stopping at the gate to get a ticket before proceeding to the top level. Once at the summit he spotted Detective Kramer's car and pulled into the tight empty spot next to it wondering how larger vehicles managed to fit. Brian was sitting with his back to the concrete barrier that served to keep the cars on the roof. He had brought his S2 AM sniper rifle, a weapon Kramer used skillfully in the Marines to save the geneticist more times than he could count. Brian was a crack shot, and Paul felt safer with him behind the scope watching his back.<p><p>

Kramer stood as Paul rounded the car, their hands met in a solid shake.

"Thanks for doing this," Paul said to an old friend.

"Hey, I don't get to take this baby out much anymore," Kramer replied, hefting the rifle, "You ready?"

A nod.

"The rappelling equipment is all set up on the roof courtesy of our local S.W.A.T. team. This key will get you in the service entrance," Kramer handed over a non-descript brass key, "there's a bathroom immediately inside to your left, change into your infiltration clothes there. Put your street clothes in a garbage bag and set it outside, we can pick it up later. The service elevator will take you directly to the roof. I've got a clear line of sight to the apartment from here, just make sure you open the curtains once your inside."

Paul grinned, it was like going twenty years into the past, "Just like old times, eh?"

Brian grunted in response, "I wish the rest of the squad could be here. We'd kick the door down proper then, none of this sneaking around stuff," he said, waving his hand in the general direction of the apartment building.

"TouchÃ© my friend," Paul replied as he headed for the stairs.

He descended quickly to street level and crossed the black car infested pavement as casually as his nerves would allow. Gains Apartment Building was an intimidating structure wrought from steel and glass, the outside sheen reflecting the busy nightlife like a giant mirror.

Paul circled the building's wide girth and entered the unmarked service door. Most of the tenants didn't want to be bothered by the employees that made their lives easy, so the service entrance was both private and discreet. Jensen eased the bathroom door open and peeked in, empty, as was to be expected at this hour. He chose a stall and stripped the tee shirt and khakis that marked him as just another civilian looking for something to do in a city that never slept.

Clicking open the briefcase, Paul procured the black infiltration suit and inspected it before pulling it on. It was skin tight and lightweight with a holster for a single weapon on the right thigh. Next he donned a lightweight Kevlar vest but not because he was anticipating being shot; the vest had rappelling loops built into the front, all he had to do was clip and go. With the vest secured tightly he holstered the pistol and pulled a black mask over his head leaving only his eyes visible under the dark cloth.

One final check of the equipment and he was ready to proceed. Jensen slipped out of the bathroom stall and glanced in the mirror, all he needed was a sword sheathed on his back and he could easily pass for a ninja. _Not bad._ He eased the bathroom door open again and peered down the hallway, it was as quiet as a graveyard. The infiltrator stole down the short carpeted passage to the elevator, thankful that the door opened immediately when he pressed the call button. Inside he punched the button for the roof. So far so good.

The elevator deposited him into a small, bare hallway with white walls and a scuffed linoleum floor. The only exit was a door to his left leading to the service stairs and a steel door affixed to the end of the passage. Paul stepped lightly to the door and opened it with a loud rusty squeak. The roof was calm and the stars shone with a white brilliance overhead. The rappelling rope was tied tightly to a solid metal pole rising vertically from the center of the roof.

Jensen picked up the nylon rope and gave it a firm tugâ€"it seemed secure enough. He threaded the rope through the harness on his vest and tossed the excess over the side of the building. The former marine cautiously approached the precipice, turned his back to the edge, and hung out over the street thirty stories below. With a deep breath he started his descent; slowly, cautiously working down the sheer building as his rubber soled shoes gripped the glass surface like fresh tires on dry pavement.

Twenty-five feet later the geneticist was in position dangling like a spider from the side of the building. The infiltrator reached into a Velcro pouch on the front of his vest and procured a window pick, _okay spidey, time to get to work._ The geneticist smiled at himself as he slipped the pick under the window and, three minutes later, unlocked the glass barrier with a barely audible click. After returning the pick to its assigned pocket Paul carefully slid the

window open and climbed through.

The closed silk curtain slid noiselessly off the latex infiltration suit as he adjusted to the new surroundings. He was crouched on a polished hardwood floor in a spacious living room; beyond that was the equally impressive entryway complete with grey stone sculptures of ancient Romans and Greeks guarding the door. In the center of the living room was a mahogany upholstered table, a black laptop sat quietly atop the expensive piece of furniture waiting to be used. Jensen pulled back all the white curtains covering the windows to give Detective Kramer a greater field of view from across the street.

Paul skipped the computer, if Kazlov came back early he wouldn't have time to shut it down before hiding. Instead, he headed towards the entryway, there had to be a library of sorts in the massive apartment. Veering to the right was a hallway ending in a document-cluttered study; that would be the most logical place to look.

* * *

>Jason hurried to the tall apartment building with his delivery. The clock was encroaching on three a.m. and he wasn't even in the apartment yet. The lobby of the high-rise was specifically designed to intimidate the non-wealthy with a sensory blitz of bright lights and polish that made the whole room sparkle. The marble floor shone with the luminance of a star, the walls were brilliant and gold colored and the ceiling loomed two stories over head. Circular stairways with polished brass handrails led up to the second floor that housed a gym and fitness center. There was no point in having money if you didn't look good flaunting it.<p><p>

Matthews wasn't impressed but feigned awe for effect as he entered and approached the reception desk.

"I have a delivery for Mr. Kazlov," he said sheepishly, looking at his feet. By looking down he made the dark haired female receptionist feel powerful and also effectively hid his face under the brim of his hat.

"What's in the bag?" She asked, gesturing to the black duffle bag and making the gold, diamond studded bracelet on her wrist sparkle.

"Clothes. This is my last delivery of the day and I just want to change and go home. My work clothes smell like pizza you see."

She frowned slightly but consented, he was only a pizza delivery boy no matter how strange his nuances. Though, she wouldn't consider someone in his late twenties to be a 'boy'. Some people just weren't as fortunate as she was, some weren't meant for a life of wealth.

"Very well," the receptionist said, "he's on the top floor. The elevators are just over there." She pointed an immaculately manicured finger towards a pair of marble outlined elevators.

"Thank you, ma'am," he nodded and hurried to the mirrored doors, pushing the call button with a free hand.

Once inside he set the pizzas in a corner and tapped the button for the penthouse level. The elevator hummed and climbed resolutely through the interior of the building, dutifully taking the hunter to its prey. When it neared its destination Jason stopped the elevator, unzipped his bag, and sifted through his normal clothes to find his own infiltration suit. After location and donning the black garb the assassin fitted a dark mask over his head and secured a silenced pistol to his thigh. Next, he opened the overhead door and threw the bag on top of the elevator. Satisfied with his new look, Jason punched the start button and the elevator continued its journey.

The vertical transport dinged pleasantly as the polished doors slid open to reveal a hallway every bit as brilliant as the reception lobby. Jason paid it no mind as he dove out of the elevator, rolled, and came up in a crouch with silenced pistol pointed down the well-lit hallway. Twelve meters away was a solid oak door complete with intricate carvings and a polished brass frame that shone like a million pieces of gold. On either side of the door were two surprised guards reaching for their concealed weapons.

Jason's silenced pistol whispered twice, two bodies collapsed in front of the door. The merc waited, his pistol held steady, watching and listening for more guards. No one came. He holstered the weapon and snuck quietly to the door, carefully maneuvering around the pools of blood that were forming.

Procuring a pick from one of the few tight pockets on the black suit, he went to work on the door. _Too easy,_ he thought after silently unlocking the door in less than sixty seconds. Easing the oak barrier open and slipping into the dark entryway, the merc scanned the room and spotted the computer. _Perfect_. That would be the most logical place to start looking.

* * *

>Paul held several documents in shaking hands. He couldn't believe what he was reading but it was all there in plain black and white. How could he have overlooked something this big? If the rebels were somehow able to pull this off they would have to be taken as a serious threat equal to, if not more-so, then the Covenant. No. This couldn't be right. There was an error in these documents somewhere, there had to be; but now was not the time to search for it, right now he needed to exfiltrate. Jensen folded the papers and tucked them into a pouch on his Kevlar vest as he made his way back into the hallway and out into the living room.<p><p>

Paul froze.

Less than fifteen feet away was another infiltrator with the exact same military grade suit. _Be cool Jensen, you were trained for this_. The intruder's back was turned and he was silhouetted by a bright computer screen. All Paul had to do was sneak up behind him and knock him out; it seemed simple enough. He wouldn't use the pistol unless he absolutely had to because it was a custom weapon with custom darts that could be traced back to him.

Slowly, one tense step after another, he approached the black clad merc.

* * *

>Jason had the information he needed. Kazlov would get to see his altered Spartans in action but that's not where Matthews part would end. It was actually only the beginningâ€”Kazlov would beg for mercy before being executed.<p><p>

As the assassin closed the laptop a floorboard squeaked behind him. He spun on his heel with unnatural quickness and drew his pistol in one fluid, seamless motion.

* * *

>Paul's training instantly took over and he drew his own weapon.<p><p>

"Drop it," the intruders said in unison.

Paul wouldn't fire from this close; the darts were lethal within eight feet of a target. He could bluff though.

"Who are you," he demanded; cold unnerving eyes stared back from behind the mask.

"I'd rather not say," the voice was smooth and unwavering. Was he an ODS? Did ONI know about the assassination attempt? Before his mind could begin to formulate answers the doorknob in the entryway rattled and turned.

* * *

>Jason tensed when he heard the door opening but kept his gaze on the man in front of him. The other intruder turned his head to look in the direction of the sound. Matthews used the diversion to his advantage, he swung his free hand and slammed his fist into the intruder's temple. The black clad opponent grunted and staggered back, giving the merc an opportunity to sprint towards the door.<p><p>

The oak door swung open just as Jason arrived to reveal a surprised gun-totting Kazlov. Matthews used the momentum to slam his elbow into the side of the spook's head, knocking him back and out of the way. He sprinted down the hallway, into the waiting elevator, and punched an illuminated button. One floor down the exquisite door slid open; Jason exited then slammed through the door leading to the stairs and navigated thirty stories of stairs as fast as his legs would carry him.

* * *

>Jensen was still recovering from the surprisingly powerful blow when he saw Kazlov stand again in his peripheral vision. Paul sprinted toward the window, firing his pistol at the glass but the darts bounced harmlessly off. He didn't have time to stop and open the window, he needed it to break. Another pull on the trigger and the gun reported the metallic click of an empty clip.<p><p>

Great.

He would just use momentum to smash through the window and try to

grab the rope. _This isn't the movies, it won't work._ It _had_ to work; there was no other way out and Kazlov wouldn't be dazed much longer. Three steps before he reached the window it exploded into a thousand tiny fragments. For a brief instant time seemed to stop as the shards of glass hung in the air like moonlit snowflakes on a crisp winter night. The illusion passed and the glass scattered across the floor like crushed ice. A shadow of a second later a 14.5mm armor-piercing round slammed into the marble wall across the living room. _Thank you, Brian_.

Paul leapt head first through the window and grabbed the nylon rope swinging in a wide arc away from the window before planting his feet on the building again. The former marine scrambled up the rope and felt a twinge of relief after getting the solid roof under his feet again. He left the rope dangling as he sprinted through the open door and into the service elevator. Once outside again he snatched the trash bag with his clothes in it and tore across the street.

He owed Detective Kramer a beer.

4. Three Strikes

****Fallout â€" Part IV: Three Strikes****

The alarm clock cut violently into the silent night with shrill methodical beeps well before the sun's first rays spilled over the horizon. Paul Jensen sleepily reached a hand through the inky darkness and fumbled for the off switch, there would be no snooze button today. Slipping from under the warm covers, Paul quickly rushed through his morning routine of showering, shaving, and downing the first cup of black coffee, all the while one thought occupied his mind. The bug. The defect in the Spartan program that every ONI geneticist had overlooked.

Now fully awake and dressed, Paul tucked his ONI ID in the vest pocket of his blue suit and grabbed the black leather briefcase waiting patiently on the kitchen table. A quick glance in the mirror showed his hair was impeccable, no need for a barber just yet. It was short enough not to need a comb but long enough that a few wisps of natural brown still managed to infiltrate the dominant gray. He didn't really mind the gray, to him it was just a sign that he was getting wiser. His father often told him to wear gray with pride, no matter what the media said it would always come back into style.

Satisfied everything was in place, Paul moved through the entryway and stepped into a brisk Hawking morning. The sun was just beginning to make its dutiful ascent through the sky and had commenced battle with an early morning fog. Jensen walked three short blocks north and descended a flight of concrete steps into the subway station. It always surprised him that the subway lobbies were kept so clean. It seemed that every night there was a report of theft or violent crime in the subways, yet for all the traveling he did beneath the city the geneticist never saw any evidence that he was in a high crime area. No graffiti adorned the concrete supports in bright colors, no broken teller windows gave silent testament to shady deeds, and not a single piece of wayward trash could be found blemishing the cement floor.

Appearances can be deceiving, he reminded himself as he handed a few dollars to an overweight man too large for the small teller booth he occupied. The city of Hawking garnered a small fortune in tourism and an unkempt subway station was a surefire way to impact that income. At any rate, Jensen was never here early enough, or late enough, to warrant more than a passing concern for the items in his pockets. Marine-bred confidence seeped out of every pore in Jensen's body and confidence repels a thief the way light repels a bat. The smart pick pockets shied away from marks like Jensen.

Yet, despite the hour, Paul still kept a wary eye on the fellow subway users as he waited patiently for the next train. They were nothing he couldn't handle, two small woman and a short bald man, but he'd rather not have to handle anything this morning. He'd had enough of that in the last week to last well into retirement and beyond. He was a regular in this station anyway and wouldn't be bothered by anyone looking for an easy mark.

Finally the telltale clinking of steel wheels turning on an iron track signaled that his train had arrived. The quartet of riders filed into the car without a word and sat. The bald man procured a newspaper while the two women moved aft and eagerly took out a book each. Though the titles of the novels were unreadable, it was easy to see by the bare chested man and the helpless damsel on the cover that they were romance novels. Paul slipped into a cushioned seat opposite the bald man wondering what women saw in those books.

Clicking the leather briefcase open, the geneticist rifled quickly through papers containing a plethora of statistics and million dollar words to procure the documents he had obtained the night before. The plan was all there in black and white but the clarity of the words didn't make it any easier to believe. In truth, an oversight of this magnitude was inevitable, the fact that Spartans were genetically altered didn't get a second thought when researching new weapons for fighting the covenant. To the scientists doing the research, there were only human genes and covenant genes and they tailored the biological weapons accordingly. Added to their ignorance was the fact that a Spartan's MJOLNIR armor was specifically designed to withstand the fallout from biological weapons. When all was said and done there were serious consequences oft overlooked in the ONI weapons development labs.

According to the documents, the new covenant-specific bio weapon being researched and built on the planet Ajax would kill a normal human but alter a Spartan's amygdale due to their unique genetic makeup, causing them to be more aggressive. In addition, it would stimulate the gene regulating quickness and strength, a deadly combination when combined with unchecked aggression. It was all theoretical, of course, and Paul tried to find solace in that solitary fact.

The peace he grasped for eluded him though, he knew the Spartan genes front and back and with the document staring back at him with cold indifference he knew it was true. He was, however, able to find a thread of comfort in the fact that some questions remained unanswered. Though whether this was actually good was debatable, Paul needed to find some silver lining to this abomination of a rain cloud. The document didn't mention how they would get the four Spartans stationed on Ajax out of their armor, nor did it explain how they planned on fighting through security to get to the storage

unit housing the biological agent. For now, it seemed, ONI still had time to correct this mistake.

Jensen looked up as the train slowed to a stop, complete with screeching brakes and lurching passengers. The steel doors slid open and Paul exited, not surprised that no one else was here at this hour. Normally he was the only passenger to disembark at this stop but today the bald man and his newspaper also had business to take care of in the middle of downtown Hawking.

With deliberate yet unhurried steps the former marine made his way through the clean, concrete lobby. He didn't like to be rushed; stopping to smell the proverbial flowers was the difference between really living and merely existing. It was another thing his father had told him on a regular basis, and he embraced that piece of advice. Some people were always in a hurry though, like the bald man behind him. _Why is he walking so close? There's plenty of room to go around me_. Paul got his answer half a second later when an unseen elbow slammed into the back of his head and the surroundings faded into the abyss.

Paul's head throbbed as he came to. The first feeling to work its way through the pain was that of a scratchy burlap sack over his head and tied tightly around his neck. Jensen tried to reach up to feel the sack but his hands were securely tied behind the chair he was sitting on. The rope tied tightly around his ankles was already rubbing them raw and even the slightest movement sent burning pain up his legs.

The former marine wasn't afraid of dieing, he had brushed elbows with The Reaper plenty of times while fighting the covenant and he was a devout Christian, but the thought of being executed didn't sit well with him here. It was not a noble execution, he would not be a martyr, and he wouldn't die trying to save someone. In movies the hero dies with glory and honor, not covered with a bag and stomach doing cartwheels.

A door opened and then shut again, Jensen's stomach did backflips.

"Ah, Mr. Jensen, you're awake. I hate to execute people when they are sleeping. It seems a bitâ€| unruly." The voice spoke as if exchanging casual banter with an old friend, yet it contained an unnerving coolness considering the circumstances.

It had to be Kazlov.

The disembodied voice continued, "You took something from my apartment yesterday, I would hate for that to fall into the wrong hands."

There were no last words from Paul Jensen, no dramatic chambering of a round from his assailant, just the quiet whisper of a silenced pistol and the release of a soul.

Chris Fisher exited the brick housing complex and walked casually down a well-trodden dirt path to the Ajax research complex. The entire planet was blanketed in a thick forest except where ONI had built its gray lifeless buildings that sat in stark contrast to the greenery of the terrain. The star that gave life to the planet rarely broke through the canopy of leaves overhead, and where it did it was often only a single ethereal beam. There was an underground hallway that led to the research facility from the apartments but Chris rarely used it, not many scientists did in the warm summer months

Fisher enjoyed the daily half-mile walks to the complex, the dense foliage was reminiscent of home where he would hunt in the thick forest that flanked his house on three sides. But unlike most hunters, his rifle was a camera and his prey rarely knew they were being shot. After arriving on Ajax over three years ago he was quickly tagged as a geek for his hunting habits around the housing complex. The fact that he had a penchant for white button-down shirts complete with pens in the pocket and black pants didn't help his image any. He tried to keep his black hair neatly combed but by the end of the day it was a disheveled mess and jutted out at odd angles.

Most of his fellow scientists ignored him, Tom Sanchez and his wife Melissa were the only ones that acknowledged his presence even when it wasn't necessary. Sure, all the scientists on Ajax had talked to him at one time or another, but it was always strictly business. Tom, however, would often tell Chris about a new animal he had seen that might make a decent photo and Melissa always seemed willing to look at any new pictures he happened to be carrying.

Chris finally arrived at the research building though he thought it looked more like a military installation with its high outer wall and square holes cut into it for defensive purposes. The first stop after entering was the exterior security checkpoint and everyday it was a new hassle for the young scientist. The security guards had an easy job and got bored quickly, they often eased their boredom at the expense of Fisher. Today, surprisingly, the guard merely nodded and sent him through. Chris quickly covered the thirty meters to the main entrance and happily opened the door, maybe today wouldn't be so bad. The interior security checkpoint was a small brick room with a long polished desk off to the right. Straight ahead was the steel door that led to the elevator that brought the scientists to the underground research labs. Chris' heart sunk, sitting behind the security desk was Gary Keller, the cruelest of the security guards.

Gary was slightly overweight from a sedentary lifestyle and a sub-par diet. Not that there weren't any places to exercise, everyone making a living on the planet had access to a gym built into the living complex, and ONI encouraged their employees to stay healthy. But Gary's only exercise was lifting beer bottles to his lips and clicking through channels on his remote. His red hair looked unwashed and greasy, as usual, and a toothy grin split his face at the sight of Chris.

"Hey, my favorite scientist!" He was loud and boisterous.

Chris pushed thick glasses higher up on his nose nervously. "Hey there, uh, Gary, how are things?" He asked, unsuccessfully trying to sound nonchalant.

"Couldn't be better, man. Hey listen, I just got a call from the higher ups and they said you didn't need to come in today. They said there was something wrong with some kind of guidance system or something, I don't know. Anyway, they asked me to tell you to go home."

Chris stood silently under the gaze of the security guard. He knew Gary was lying but if he called him on it then it would only be worse tomorrow. One day he would stand up to the bully, but not today. He turned dejectedly and headed for the door, it was time to write up yet another complaint that would be completely ignored. As Gary moved to return to his post he casually knocked the files from under Chris' arm, the papers scattered over the dusty floor.

"Whoa, you should be more careful with those, aren't they top secret or something?" Gary chuckled at himself as he rounded the desk to return to his post.

With jaw clenched tight in anger, Chris scooped the papers up and walked out. The young scientist started down the path towards his apartment with head hung in shame, why couldn't he just stand up to them? He hadn't walked ten feet when a familiar voice stopped him.

"Something wrong Chris?"

Fisher looked up, Melissa Sanchez, seven months pregnant and glowing, stood in the path, a look of concern fixed on her angelic face.

"Just Gary. Again."

Melissa frowned, Chris almost grinned. He could walk right past Gary now, nobody messed with Melissa, especially not a pregnant Melissa. It didn't hurt that her husband was in the company gym every single day and was built like an NFL linebacker.

She grabbed Chris by the arm and stormed up to the security building, Gary jumped as she burst through the door with the scientist in tow. One poison filled look was all it took to get the security guard to cooperate.

"H-hey Mrs. Sanchez. Uh, let me get the door for you." Gary punched a button behind the counter and the steel door leading to the elevator unlocked with a metallic click. "Have a nice day ma'am." As the pair of scientists walked by Gary scowled, Chris flashed him a triumphant smile, it may be worse tomorrow but the young scientist would revel in victory today.

Inch by inch the immaculately carved box was lowered into the ground. The UNSC flag draped over the black polished coffin hid most of the

intricate details, but even if it hadn't obscured the carvings no one would have remarked on the beauty of its craftsmanship. People rarely did at funerals, especially not with the mother weeping and the father trying his best to stand solemn and strong.

When at last the casket had been lowered to its final resting place, heads were bowed in quiet contemplation as a light breeze tried to comfort the black-clad mourners. Some wept openly, breaking the silence with sobs, while others let quiet tears slid down their cheeks. One man made a vow. Detective Brian Kramer, former UNSC marine, would not mourn until he saw his best friend's killer lying in a crimson pool. The detective turned and walked across the grass carpet of the cemetery to his waiting car, it had been three days since they had found Paul Jensen's body. The killer had been alive three days too long.

Jason Matthews was lost in deep thought despite the roar of the drop ship's engines. The information he had gleaned from Kazlov's computer was disappointing at best. Damning was a better term for it, though Matthew's soul wasn't the one in trouble this time. No, as usual he would be the curse-bringer, the arbiter of death willing to bring down the hammer of eternal condemnation on those that crossed him.

The rebels had no bio-engineered soldiers; this was no 'test run' to measure results. The four Spartans on Ajax were all Kazlov ever had, which is why he wanted them alive. That was strike one against the rebel spy, lying was never a good way to gain trust, and lying to a hired gun was the best way to wind up with more holes than the human body is meant to have. Since he lied about the mission he surly lied about the payment, Matthews had that figured out the moment the offer left the deceitful spy's mouth. Strike two. Two strikes were enough to get anyone killed in this business, but three strikes added a layer of cement to the death warrant that would not easily be repealed. Kazlov's third mistake was assuming Matthews wouldn't come back alive; nothing will haste death's cold grip more than an assumption. Strike three.

So Matthews would do the job, surprise Kazlov by returning, and then execute him for lying. He may not get paid the full amount, or at all, but it was the way the game was played. At least, that's the way Jason played it and it had served him well thus far. It wasn't that he hated Kazlov, hate was too strong an emotion for the assassin to conjure, but he expected to get paid for services rendered, either by blood or by money.

The pilot announced over the COM that they would be landing in two minutes. A thousand other soldiers populating a fleet of drop ships heard the same message from their respective pilots. Jason shoved all erroneous thoughts from his mind and replayed the mission while making a final check of his gear. The lightweight suit he bore was custom made and contained electronics to make him invisible to a Spartan's motion tracker. Constructed from a breathable material, the dark green suit was like a second skin, allowing Matthews to move quickly and quietly from one location to another. It didn't offer much protection if he were to engage an enemy, but then, he wasn't

planning on being seen until all four Spartans were taken care of.

To take care of them, he had another custom made item, a weapon he simple dubbed 'The Stick'. Strapped to his back now, the weapon was painted the same color as his suit and resembled the S2 AM Sniper Rifle. One barrel was loaded with projectiles similar to the Covenant needles, except instead of exploding into plasma, the needles in The Stick would deliver a dose of chemicals able to knock a Spartan unconscious. An added under slung barrel had capsules of pure plasma that, after striking a target, would have similar results of a plasma grenade without actually hurting the Spartan. In essence, The Stick would render MJOLNIR armor nearly useless by disabling the shields and then delivering a projectile that could pierce the thick plates.

Jason un-holstered the pistol strapped securely to his thigh and checked the magazine, he knew it was full before looking but he had a methodical routine before missions that always ended by checking the pistol's clip. The assassin slammed the magazine home with a satisfying click of metal and smoothly slipped the pistol back into the Kevlar holster. Scanning the drop ship's dark interior showed rebels checking their equipment as well or sitting silently in contemplation. Less than a minute to touchdown, Matthews was ready.

Xion peered intently through the scope of his sniper rifle waiting for one of many stationary target three hundred meters away to pop up. This was too easy, a child could hit a Covenant silhouette at this range. The thought gave the Spartan pause, fresh out of the ONI program, he wasn't much older than a child himself. The Ajax research facility is where ONI sent Spartans for additional training if they weren't quite "battle ready"; apparently their idea of training was babysitting a couple hundred scientists while shooting at inorganic paper.

A silhouette stood without a sound to the Spartan's left. Xion adjusted his aim and squeezed the trigger, the rifle returned its signature crack as the round sped toward its target. The universe now had one less paper Elite to worry about. It could be worse, Xion thought, he at least had a competent trainer.

Wolveryne was a Spartan of legend; he had fought the Covenant on more planets than he cared to count and had battled the alien race across every conceivable terrain, including the vacuum of space. He wasn't one to boast though, and that made him a perfect candidate for this job. Some Spartans felt discouraged when sent for additional training on Ajax and it wouldn't help their attitudes if the one training them was arrogant. Instead, Wolveryne humbly corrected mistakes and praised even the smallest increment of improvement while downplaying his own accomplishments.

"Nice shot, your reaction times are improving," Wolveryne said, "maybe we can go hunt some live targets tomorrow, there are big, fast animals on this rock that would just as soon eat you as look at you."

"Sounds good," Xion stood and slung the rifle onto his armored back, "will Spudnik and Marauder join us?"

Wolveryne nodded, it would be good for the trainees to work as a unit for once, all three were ready for combat and would make fine Spartans. Behind the mirrored visor Wolveryne opened his mouth to speak but was cut short as a transmission came over the COM. Multiple rebel drop ships were inbound.

"Warthog, now!" Wolveryne commanded.

The two armor clad soldiers sprinted to the small vehicle without another word. Wolveryne slipped into the driver seat while Xion climbed into the back readying the M1100-Mk II by disengaging the safety and bracing as Wolveryne slammed down on the accelerator. The over sized tires spit out rocks as the duo tore down the dense forest path sliding through turns and scattering all manner of indigenous wildlife.

Thirty seconds later Wolveryne yanked the hand brake up and skidded to a stop, wedging the warthog in front of the gate to the research building. The pair of Spartans dismounted and double-timed it to the barracks on the east side of the complex. Inside was a whirl of activity as marines donned their battle gear and checked their rifles, two additional Spartans stood like statues among scurrying ants.

Captain Craig Dawson, at a commanding six-foot-three and two hundred twenty pounds, entered the barracks, the ants snapped to attention.

"At ease men, this is not a drill."

He had the growl of an old western villain and dark eyes to match. Gray hair was covered under the standard issue UNSC helmet, it was a testament to his skills that he had survived long enough to warrant gray hair. The captain wasn't one for long speeches either, he expected the soldiers under his command to know their roles and carry them out with precision befitting his beloved corps.

"Wolveryne, get your sniper up in the nest for recon, have your other two Spartans flank the entrance but make sure they stay behind the wall for now, we don't know if they are using snipers of their own yet. As for you, I want you to support any squad that needs it. Marines, get on the fifty cals and give 'em hell, move out!"

He watched as twenty five marines sprinted into the sun-soaked day and took up positions. Three soldiers manned the trio of .50 caliber machine guns that were electronically controlled from behind the wall, view screens allowed them to see what they were aiming at without being exposed to enemy fire. The soldiers not manning one of the heavy weapons took up positions adjacent to one of the myriad of square holes cut into the wall and waited for the signal to commence firing.

The drop ships crashed heavily through the tree canopy in a cacophony of snapping branches as they descended to the surface of Ajax one

mile north of the facility. With rocket launchers liberally distributed though the ranks, the rebels picked their way through the dense forest. They knew there were Spartans here and they nervously swung their heads from side to side checking every shadow for the legendary soldiers. Upon exiting the drop ship, Matthews immediately disappeared into the dense foliage, heading west towards the scientist's living quarters.

The squat brick buildings looked empty, which didn't surprise him, the alarm would have been raised by now and any non-combatants would have made their way to the fallout bunker underground. The assassin crouched just inside the thick forest scanning every window with cold blue eyes; once he committed to the open lawn there was no cover to hide in. Convinced it was clear, Matthews moved his limber girth from the shadows of the forest and ran in a crouch to the nearest green door.

The lock gave up easily to his picking and the green clad soldier slipped through the narrow opening closing the door gently behind him. The hallway was well lit by recessed overhead lighting, and red lights blinked dutifully signifying that the alarm had indeed been raised. Doors leading to individual apartments flanked the hallway at regular intervals. Directly in front of him was the door leading to the underground passage to the facility, this one was unlocked but he had other business to take care of first.

Matthews crept down the hallway and picked the first locked door he came to. Easing the door open, the assassin scanned the room cautiously. Nothing moved. It was a well-kept apartment with plenty of space for a single scientist; the living room was plain yet comfortable and the kitchen was well stocked. Jason ignored all of the sights and headed straight to the bedroom to find a suitable change of clothes; he wouldn't be able to get into the fallout shelter wearing his green suit. The assassin grabbed the first clean shirt he found and also pilfered a pair of jeans; they were a little big around the waist so he procured a belt from a nearby dresser. Satisfied with his newly acquired items, Jason headed for the hallway dropping the clothes on the floor just inside door. Once the Spartans were taken care of he could quickly change and get to the shelter.

Back in the hallway Matthews quickly made his way to the door leading down to the tunnel. After descending two flights of stairs and proceeding through another door the assassin emerged into a long hallway constructed of cement blocks. It was the kind of hallway that screamed out 'military' with its less than adequate lighting and drab, almost depressing, walls. Jason took no time to ponder the décor of military installations as he keyed the radio built into the suit's sleeve.

"I'm in, start the attack."

5. Blood Soaked Grass

The plan was a simple one, but that didn't keep Jason Mathews from reviewing it in his head as he made his way down the empty corridors of a besieged ONI base. All non-combatants had made their way to the fallout shelter giving the assassin free reign of the compound, he still wouldn't throw caution to the wind and stomp recklessly through

the facility, though. Even in grocery stores back home he would subconsciously avoid other patrons, so it came as second nature to approach every open doorway and intersecting hallway as a potential for the unexpected. A wayward Spartan or soldier rounding a corner could end the merc's career in a hurry.

If all was going to plan though, the military personnel would be tied up on the surface trying to defend a base that has already been infiltrated. The rebels would eliminate the marines quickly using snipers in the trees, the Spartans would then be left to expend their ammunition on elusive targets skirting the edges of the forest. Some of the more devoted rebels would charge the fortified base, sacrificing their lives for what they thought was the greater good. Those were the most dangerous enemies, the true believers, the ones that convince themselves beyond any doubt that they are in the right and their cause is worth dying for. Anyone could pick up a rifle, act tough and pretend to support an ideal; but when the bullets start flying, that is when you find out who is committed and who is just in it for show.

Once the super soldier's rifles were empty they would send a single Spartan to retrieve more munitions, that's where Matthews' part began. There were certain parts of the plan that he wasn't supposed to know about of course, one of which was an explicit order from Kazlov to the rebel leader in charge of the operation calling for the execution of the assassin before evacuating the planet. Jason was sure the leader would report him as dead when he didn't show up to the drop ships, it would make Kazlov's face all the more priceless when Matthews decided to drop in on him. For now, though, the assassin had more pressing matters to deal with.

The base had a clean sheen to it, which was to be expected in an ONI facility. The floor was polished and mopped and, even with only dim emergency lights on, reflected the mercenary as he ran silently in a crouch through the wide halls. He stopped at an intersection and pressed his back to the wall; according to the blueprints he had studied, the ammunition closet would be down the next hall behind an unmarked door.

Unholstering the silenced pistol strapped to his thigh, Jason glanced over his left shoulder and around the corner. It was his normal ritual for assessing the situation in adjacent hallways and rooms and one he had perfected, though it was hardly original. A quick glance gave him enough time to scan for threats while keeping most of his body behind cover. The hallway was clear. Slipping quietly from cover, Matthews moved like a specter towards an unmarked steel door halfway down the dim corridor.

After picking the lock he nudged the door open and peeked inside. The closet was small but adequate, rifles stood vertically in holders on the floor and two shelves running the lengths of three walls contained clips for the SRS99C-S2 AM Sniper rifle, BR55 Battle Rifle, and the M6D pistol. Satisfied with the discovery, Matthews eased the door shut and retreated back to the hallway he came from. After rounding the corner the merc crouched and waited, a Spartan would come along soon enough.

* * *

>The silence was laced with dread and apart from a strong breeze, not

even nature dared to disturb the quiet. No animals called to each other and no birds were singing their cheerful songs, predator and prey alike waited for the clash with bated breath. In the sniper nest built atop the guard station centered in the compound, Xion stared through his scope at the swaying, almost hypnotic forest. Wolveryne's voice came through the COM and broke the silence. <p>"Anything yet?"

The Spartan slowly scanned the forest for the hundredth time, and for the hundredth time the only thing filling his scope was green foliage and brown bark. "Not a thing."

The disturbing truth was rebels could be on the fringe of the forest and they'd never know it. Enemy troops could move with relative freedom in the thick undergrowth and not worry about disturbing the foliage and giving away their position due to the breeze that was already playing havoc with the greenery. It was an enviable place to be, Xion thought, much better than being perched in a concrete nest with little cover. Not only did the breeze mask the enemy's movements, it also masked their footsteps. All Xion could hear was the rustle of leaves and all he saw was the forest moving as if it had a life of its own. As long as the rebels didn't get too close to the edge, he might as well be looking for ghosts.

That is, until a salvo of rockets screamed from the forest like a charging bull. The 102mm High-Expositive rounds slammed into the wall, spraying bits of concrete into the air like shrapnel, but the barrier stood firm. Half a second later four additional rockets burst from cover and impacted the wall in the same place as the first rounds. A third barrage finally punched through, raining chunks of jagged brick onto the marines ducking behind the barricade.

"Light 'em up with the fifties," Captain Dawson barked from a crouched position.

The marines stationed at the remote turrets obliged and within seconds .50 caliber rounds were spewing from the barrels like horizontal rain, ripping through underbrush and falling small trees with aplomb. Using the view-screens behind the wall, the soldiers marched the chaos along the tree line and back again before Dawson gave the cease-fire command.

More silence, broken only by the persistent breeze and now accompanied by the hiss of the .50 caliber turrets quickly dissipating heat from their barrels.

Xion's voice cracked through every COM, "_We've got incoming soldiers at twelve o'clock._"

Marines peered through the holes cut into the wall in time to see a squad of rebels materialize out of the forest. It was the last image to get burned into their retinas as sniper fire erupted from the wooded area. Eighteen heads exploded into crimson clouds before the six remaining of marines could duck back behind the wall.

A few meters away near the blocked entrance to the compound, Spudnik's hands balled into tight fists as he witnessed the carnage. Palming a grenade, he spoke into his COM, "I've got this group, Xion." A light in his helmet winked on and off as Xion acknowledged. The young Spartan glanced out of the base, the rebel squad moved

toward the wall unhindered. After making a quick judge of distance Spudnik let the grenade fly.

It was not a soft lob meant for the explosive to land at the advancing squad's feet, this throw was more akin to a major league pitch. A pitch thrown from bionically enhanced arms. The grenade was unidentifiable as it tore through the air like a missile screaming towards a target. Finally noticing the inbound object, the rebel squad leader turned in time to guess wrongly that it was a rock hurtling towards him. The only thing to enter his mind after the initial thought was a standard-issue frag grenade.

The projectile hit with enough force to flip the rebel over backwards, spraying a ribbon of blood from the collapsed face before hitting the ground in an awkward heap. The rest of the squad quickly went prone, searching wildly for targets that would never show. The soldier unlucky enough to have hit the ground next to his fallen leader caught the brunt of the explosion, his body ejected from the earth and spun in a grotesque ragdoll dance before crashing to the ground as a bloodied mess. The other soldiers in the squad didn't fare any better as the shrapnel expanded from the squad leader's skull and ripped through soft rebel flesh turning organs into unidentifiable mulch.

Another rebel squad ventured bravely onto the killing ground from the safety of the forest. The .50 caliber death-bringers lit up sending the squad running back into the foliage with lead messengers giving chase. More rockets erupted from the depths after the barrage of bullets had subsided and screamed towards the three emplaced weapons. They impacted and exploded into a fiery ball sending a brilliant display of sparks and twisted chunks of steel haphazardly to the ground. One gunner was lucky enough to be blown back by the impact and escaped relatively unharmed, the other two were crushed under the weight of their fallen weapons.

With the main defenses down and invisible snipers waiting in the forest, the remaining marines had no choice but to sit and wait for the inevitable onslaught. They didn't have to wait long, from two separate angles more sniper fire erupted, slugs zipped through the newly formed hole in the barricade and sank into soft flesh.

Xion had had enough; with only Captain Dawson remaining from the marine squad it was time to retaliate. The Spartan wasn't sure why the rebels hadn't targeted him with their snipers, but he wasn't about to return the favor. He didn't have to wait long before another squad of rebels came into view. Xion aimed with steady hands and even breathing, waiting patiently for the squad to advance enough to make retreat impossible.

Fire belched from the rifle as the bullet escaped the barrel and sped towards its target. The rebel never heard the shot as a BIG POW round punched through his chest with a thick spray of crimson and slammed him violently to the ground. The remnant of the squad immediately ran, moving with erratic jukes and sidesteps to avoid the sniper fire. Xion wouldn't have any of it, with inhuman precision he picked the squad apart one by one resulting in exploded heads, gaping chest wounds, and blood soaked grass. The talented sniper relentlessly decimated two additional squads before running out of clips.

"_I'm empty, heading to the ammo closet_."

Xion leapt from the platform with uncanny grace for such a large soldier and disappeared into the compound. Wolveryne glanced from behind the wall through the gaping hole and surveyed the carnage then ducked back to speak to Captain Dawson.

"Anything seem strange to you about the rebel tactics?"

Dust from the blasted wall shifted and fell from Dawson's helmet as he nodded to the Spartan. "You mean the way they're sending out squads to be killed and using attrition when they have superior numbers? Something doesn't sit right, that's for sure." The Captain glanced over his shoulder, "If the snipers move again they'll have a clean shot right on our position, we should reloca-"

A sniper round punched through the back of the Captain's head, leaving only the lower jaw intact as the body was thrown to the ground. Wolveryne grabbed the body and dragged it further down the wall as he tried to figure out the enemies plan. The snipers had a clear shot at a Spartan, but they chose to take down a marine Captain instead?

Wolveryne moved back down to the jagged gap in the wall and looked into the forest from behind the rubble. _What are you planning?_

* * *

>Armor clad feet running on a polished tile floor echoed through the empty base. Matthews un-slung the custom rifle from his back and waited. The feet stopped, a door rattled and opened, munitions were quickly swiped from a steel shelf. As the door shut, Jason eased around the corner and got into a prone position with rifle secured into his shoulder and crosshairs on the back of a purple Spartan. The assassin squeezed the trigger and a small ball of condensed plasma whipped silently through the air towards its target.<hr>What got his attention first was the wet smacking sound of a liquid impacting his back at high speed. What made him worry was his suits alarm system warning him that the shields had dropped to zero percent effectiveness. Normally under circumstances like this Xion would quickly find cover and let his shields recharge, but before he could take a step another object impacted his back. This one bore through the armor and lodged itself between his shoulder blades. A burning pain came next, as the Spartan reached for the object embedded in his armor the hallway tilted and the subdued colors from the dim light began to swirl together. Darkness followed.

* * *

>Matthews watched with satisfaction as the Spartan fell forward and hit the ground with the weight of a boulder. The floor trembled slightly on impact and even though the armor-clad soldier didn't move, Jason held his ground just in case the prey had come with backup. After several seconds of silence Jason retrieved another dart from a chest pocket, slipped it into the chamber of his gun, and closed the bolt. With caution the assassin moved down the hallway towards the felled Spartan, always keeping a watchful eye on the far end of the corridor. <p>Once beside the unconscious super-soldier he quickly located the latches under the helmet and it. The head behind the helmet looked surprisingly human, not that Matthews was expecting anything else, but there was always a certain stereotype ingrained in

every mind that Spartans were nothing but machines. The mercenary checked the Spartan's pulse; it was even and strong.<p>

The easy part was over, now Matthews wouldn't have an opportunity to shoot his quarry in the back. There was no way he could move the unconscious soldier so he would just have to leave him in the middle of the hallway. Another Spartan would be along soon and, hopefully, would stop to check on his comrade. That's when Matthews would strike again.

* * *

>Rebel squads came at regular intervals now, spreading out as they advanced to force the trio of Spartans to expend more ammunition and question the use of grenades. Wolveryne leaned out and ripped another squad apart with a few well-placed bursts from his rifle. Ducking back, he ejected the empty clip and slammed a fresh one home. Across the gap in the wall, Spudnik and Marauder were taking turns firing and reloading, between the three Spartans they were able to keep a steady stream of morale withering fire on the advancing enemy. Mangled and bullet ridden bodies fell onto twisted, grenade blasted corpses as the body count continued to rise.<p><p>

Wolveryne slipped behind the wall again and slid his last clip into the rifle.

"I'm on my last clip," he said with uncanny calmness into his COM, "how about a warm up, Marauder?"

The armor-clad soldier nodded as he slung an empty rifle over his shoulder and procured his pistol.

* * *

>The sound of feet approaching the hallway echoed down the corridor again, though this time they were quieter and laced with caution. Matthews waited just around the corner for the footsteps to stop at the downed Spartan. The mercenary slowly peeked around the corner; the armor-clad soldier was crouched by the body checking for vitals. Jason eased the rifle up to his shoulder quietly and gently squeezed the trigger; a second shot came after thumbing the selector on his rifle. The Spartan jerked back like a startled snake when the plasma hit then winced as the needled embedded itself into his thigh. He managed to yank the needle out and attempt to examine it, but his arms fell limply to his sides. The soldier's legs gave out next and he slumped to his knees then finally fell forward next to his fellow Spartan. <p>Matthews advanced slowly with his rifle up and a fresh needle in the chamber. After removing the helmet and tossing it into the ammunition closet, he moved further down the hallway and glanced around the corners. The next Spartan would be as cautious as a surgeon doing brain surgery on the president so Matthews needed to find another location to wait. In the adjacent hallway, a few meters to his left, Jason spotted a small office. The assassin crept to the abandoned workspace and entered, leaving the door slightly ajar.<p>

The office was bare save for an empty wooden desk, Matthews assumed the former occupant was either fired or had resigned. As he started the waiting game again he found himself wondering why anyone would want to leave this planet. If ONI hadn't settled here first he would

have enjoyed living here; with the thick forest and abundant wildlife it was a hunters dream. And there was no greater hunter than Jason Matthews.

* * *

>Wolveryne dropped the empty rifle and palmed his pistol, the rebels had stopped rushing the base but they still skirted the edge of the forest. From behind the wall he spoke into his COM to the only Spartan still topside. <p>"The rebels must have infiltrated the base; I'll stay just inside the door of the security building and hold them off as long as I can. You run down to the ammo closet and find out what happened. If you can't find anything just grab some ammo and double-time it back up here."<p>

Spudnik nodded, "_I'm on it_."

With a few last shots into the forest the pair of Spartans ran into the security building, Wolveryne knelt by the door with pistol aimed out, Spudnik sprinted to the elevator and punched the button. The Spartan took a few steps back and trained his rifle on the steel doors. They slid open, the elevator was free of threats, Spudnik entered and pushed the button for the next floor down.

The doors slid open, too noisily the Spartan thought, and Spudnik leapt out, rolled, and came up with rifle at the ready. An empty, lifeless corridor greeted him; Spudnik proceeded to the first intersecting hallway and stopped. Nothing showed up on his radar, friendly or otherwise, but Spudnik still cautiously peered around the corner. Nothing. The soldier quickly moved past the intersection and stopped at a second crossing, glancing around this corner revealed two downed Spartans. Spudnik immediately withdrew from the corner and turned in a tight circle with rifle at his shoulder, everything seemed clear. Slipping quickly around the corner he advanced cautiously down the hallway, periodically checking behind him for threats.

Without taking his finger off the trigger of his weapon and without looking down Spudnik checked for a pulse on his fallen comrades, both were strong. He activated the COM and reported the findings to Wolveryne.

"_Are they secure?"_ Came the reply mixed with sounds of gunfire.

"No sign of threats, they should be okay."

"_Good enough, get some clips and frags and get up here."_

The Spartan slowly backed his way toward the ammunition closet, pivoting slowly at the hips to sweep for threats. With one hand he reached back and opened the door, only after slipping into the room did the Spartan lower his rifle. After swiping four rifle clips and an equal number of grenades from the shelf Spudnik shouldered his rifle again and ran in a crouch back down the hall to the corner. From there he made a quick sweep left and right and headed towards the elevator.

Suddenly his shields dropped to zero, half a second later a burning pain raged in the middle of his back. The Spartan spun quickly and

went prone, scanning for threats but all he saw was darkness as his head went limp and hit the floor.

* * *

>For the third time Matthews slowly and methodically made his way to a fallen Spartan. After discarding the helmet he continued to the elevator, there was only one Spartan left and, Jason assumed, he would be distracted enough to make a quick strike topside. When the elevator doors opened one floor up he realized his mistake, the Spartan was no longer outside but crouched inside with pistol out and ready. <p>"It's about timeâ€|" the Spartan said as he turned but stopped when he saw Mathews standing outside the elevator. Jason's training took over instantly as he dove sideways behind a steel desk. Wolveryne only had time to take one step forward before a salvo of rockets impacted the building just above the door. Wolveryne was thrown to the floor as heavy chunks of concrete rained down like meteors falling from the sky.<p>

Through the dust and debris Matthews saw his quarry on the ground. Moving before he could think, the assassin sprinted to the dazed Spartan and quickly removed his helmet. Procuring a needle, Jason slammed it into Wolveryne's neck as close to the shoulder as he could get it, being careful to miss any vital arteries. Jason sat back against the table and breathed a sigh of release as the tranquilizer went to work, even though his mission was not totally complete, the hardest part was over. After a few seconds the assassin stood and went to the elevator, he exited one floor down. Matthews sprinted through the complex to the underground passage, upon emerging from the depths into the apartment building he quickly scooped up the clothes he had set aside.

After changing and pulling on a lab coat he picked up his dark green suit and spoke into the COM.

"I'm all set here, see you at the extraction point."

The mercenary dropped the suit but secured the pistol in the small of his back under the lab coat. Satisfied everything was secure, Matthews made his way to an elevator and descended twenty floors into the earth. As the doors slid open he was greeted by a short, wide hallway built from thick Titanium-A. To the right was a door leading to the stairs, at the end of the corridor was a thick door with a small security camera above it. As Jason approached a security guard opened the door and glared.

"You're late."

Jason nodded fake his submissiveness. "Yeah, sorry about that, I was out in the forest and I didn't hear the alarm."

The security guard waved him in and shut the door, grumbling at the lack of common sense exhibited from seemingly brilliant scientists.

As he entered, Jason realized that ONI went all out to make their employees feel comfortable. The large circular room was more akin to a ritzy country club than a shelter for people in danger. An alcove opposite the entrance housed vending machines and cappuccino makers. The center of the room was lower and contained comfortable looking

chairs and couches where a plethora of scientists sat discussing anything from sports to politics. Everyone seemed oblivious to the conflict outside; _they must think this is some kind of drill. _Jason let the thought slip from his mind, soon enough they would know the truth.

6. Awakenings

Lights flickered, sparked, and died while walls trembled and cracked as the blast ravaged the empty wing of the facility that housed the biological agent. Conversations were cut short as the shockwave permeated the thick Titanium-A walls of the fallout shelter. The lights winked out momentarily, scientists and security guards alike held a collective breath then breathed a sigh of relief as the backup generator whirred to life. They assumed a loss of the main power was the worst that would happen, but Jason Matthews knew better. The ONI employees were all safe for now, he was sure; another rebel drop-ship was inbound to pick up the unconscious Spartans littering the halls, but the scientists on _Ajax_ would watch reports on television as the mutated soldiers were dropped into ONI military installations. For now though, all Matthews could do was just sit and wait for the inevitable search and rescue operation.

* * *

>Out of the select few things that could make Admiral Bill Jennings wish he wasn't the head of ONI, the shrill ring of a phone at three o'clock in the morning was the worst of them. Like most military personnel, Jennings was able to go longer without sleep than most civilians, but just because he could do it didn't mean he _wanted_ to. The call was inevitable, really, the admiral's favorite baseball team had gone into extra innings and as a sports fanatic, he had insisted on staying up to watch the game, much to the chagrin of his wife. Fate, it seemed, was not a fan of sleep.

Reaching for the receiver, he found himself wishing the phone would play a soothing melody to ease him out of sleep instead of being jarred awake by a nerve-grating tone that had accompanied the devices for hundreds of years. He silenced the ringing by lifting the receiver to his ear; a sleepy "Yeah?" was all he could muster at this hour.

"Sorry to wake you Admiral, one of our research facilities was just attacked by a large rebel force." The voice was calm despite the information it conveyed.

"They hit a research facility?" _Why?_

"Yes sir, biological weapons research on _Ajax_."

Jennings bolted upright as beads of sweat broke out on his forehead, his wife mumbled and stirred beside him. "I'll be at the office in thirty minutes." _They know! Dear God the rebels know!_ The admiral was wide-awake now and even skipped his traditional morning cup of coffee.

Twenty-seven minutes later Jennings was sitting in his plush office chair poring intently over wordy status reports. After reading the last page he tucked the papers into a red folder marked 'Top Secret'

and closed it.

"These reports are worthless," he told his second in command as he filed the folder away in his desk. "One of these days I'm going to have someone explain to me why it takes four pages to say that a biological agent was possibly released and that's all they know." Jennings paused to massage his temples before continuing; "We need a squad of ODSs on the ground to assess the situation." _If there is any ground left._

"It has already been done sir," Captain Doug Pikins said from across the desk, "They should be coming out of slip-space near _Ajax_ within the next few minutes."

* * *

>A set of pale blue eyes opened slowly, blinked twice, and gazed up from the ground at the rubble that was once a security station. Confusion set in first; the owner of the eyes didn't know how he came to be buried by thick slabs of heavy concrete in a crumbling building. In attempting to wiggle free, he was surprised at his ability to move the slabs that would have flattened a normal man. Firmly planting his elbow on the floor, the Spartan curled his arm and lifted the rubble with relative ease. With a quick, powerful shove two slabs were sent hurtling through the air and came crashing down on a polished steel desk accompanied by a resounding metallic crunch.<p><p>

The Spartan grinned at the results but his expression quickly melted into an angry grimace as a burning pain flared in his neck. With a newly freed arm he reached up and felt a thin object lodged just above his shoulder. Wolveryne removed the annoyance with powerful yet careful fingers and inspected it.

A needle?

Memories flooded the Spartan's mutated brain as he stared at the bloodied object held in gauntleted hands. Remembrances of surgery and pain flicked through his mind like a poorly edited movie; the scientists had given him new skin. Metal skin. Anger began to burn as he recalled a happy childhood full of possibilities before _they_ took him away and turned him into nothing more than a machine to do their bidding. Finally he recalled every facet of his training, every word uttered on the subject of combat raced through the soldier's mind and laced his veins with sweet adrenaline.

Wolveryne snapped the needle between his thumb and forefinger and dropped the projectile as he stood to an imposing two and a half meter height. He took a step toward the elevator but a familiar object on the ground caught his eye and gave the behemoth pause. Yes, it was his head, it would complete him. After slipping on and securing the helmet Wolveryne headed to the elevator, he had three brothers somewhere in the base and together they would destroy ONI starting with this very facility.

* * *

>The drop-ship cruised through the sky of Ajax low enough to cause trees underneath to dance and birds to scatter and chirp their protests. The vessel alighted gently on the battle-scarred,

body-strewn clearing next to the security building as the rear hatch was lowered. Troy Palmer drove a buggy small enough to fit through the wide halls of the facility from the back of the Pelican with three additional rebels riding on the attached flatbed. Even with their motorized cart it would take the better part of a day to remove the MJOLNIR armor from each soldier and bring it all back to the ship. In addition, they needed to load up the individual bodies once they had all the armor secured and to top it all off the quartet of rebels were forced to wear bulky bio-suits that further slowed their efforts.

At least the Spartans are knocked out, Palmer thought as he motored into the security building through a blasted out wall. According to reports from rebels that had survived the assault, the first Spartan body would be in the security building. It took less than two minutes for fear to grip the soldiers as they stood in a Spartan-less room with rifles clutched in shaking hands. Troy composed himself enough to start giving orders but didn't bother hiding his fear.

"Okay," the big rebel said with a trembling voice, "we're going to leave the buggy here and return quietly to the ship." He paused to swallow hard before continuing, "From there we will report in and leave the planet."

With no objections the foursome trotted as quickly as they dared back to the drop-ship. Once inside, Troy immediately tore off his helmet and went to the pilot seat while the remaining three closed and sealed the rear hatch. A loud metallic thump on top of the ship gave the rebel pause as he reached for the radio. Four pairs of eyes stared at the ceiling with wide-eyed fear hoping the sound was nothing to worry about but at the same time _knowing_ they wouldn't be leaving the planet alive.

Troy winced instinctively as an armored hand smashed violently through the roof of the ship and gripped the rebel's head with five thick fingers. The skull cracked and sunk giving the assailant a firm grip with which to lift the flailing rebel. A scream escaped his lips, the Spartan's fist balled, crushing Troy's head like a ripe tomato.

The three remaining rebels watched in a horror-induced stupor as the body was released from the monster's grip and fell limply to the floor. A pair of grenades were dropped through the new opening and rolled innocently toward the rear of the vessel. The soldiers turned in a panic to open the hatch but each one knew it was a futile effort. Less than two seconds later the walls of the shuttle were painted crimson with rebel blood.

* * *

>Three miles north of the facility a Pelican hovered just above the forest as a squad of four ODSTs fast-rope to the surface of Ajax. Wishing the soldiers good hunting, the pilot eased the shuttle away from the treetops and rocketed back to the _UNSC Atlas_ floating just outside the planet's atmosphere. From the cruiser, the video footage from the ODST's helmets would be relayed to ONI headquarters, giving them information about the squad's findings in real-time.

The elite soldiers moved silently through the thick grabbing

underbrush keeping their heads on a swivel to constantly check for possible rebel threats lurking in the foliage. Clad in black lightweight biohazard suits, the squad was nearly indistinguishable from the tree canopy shadows that covered them.

An hour later the four soldiers crouched just inside the tree line and gazed out at the ONI research facility. Using his helmet's zoom function, Sergeant Tom Spielman surveyed the rebel drop-ship and the inside of the ruined guard station.

Most of his military career had been spent with the Orbital Drop Shock Troopers, and he wouldn't have it any other way. A soldier through and through, he enjoyed being in the thick of a firefight but his specialty was stealth. Sneaking behind the enemy and taking them down silently would never get old for the sergeant. Some said he was merely afraid of attacking the enemy head-on, to that Spielman would just smile and nod. He could understand why they would think that; they had never been stalked by an ODSST and couldn't fathom what real fear was.

"Looks clear," Tom said as he disengaged the zoom with an audible whir of electronics. "We'll approach that hole in the wall one at a time and keep each other covered. Pay special attention to that drop-ship, if there are any rebels still alive that's where they'd be hiding."

With that the sergeant roadie-ran across the clearing and pressed his back to the wall. The waning sunlight glinted off the grey visor of his helmet as he slinked along the barrier to the jagged opening. Once there the ODSST trained his battle rifle on the rebel drop-ship while Corporal Alan Redding proceeded across the green expanse and shimmied along the wall.

After getting into position the ODSST tapped his leader on the shoulder twice, signifying that he had Spielman covered as he advanced further. The sergeant slipped through the open barrier and sprinted silently to the nose of the drop-ship, crouching and covering the security building as he arrived. Another ODSST materialized out of the foliage and took Corporal Redding's place by the wall, who in turn advanced and covered the crumbling building while Spielman methodically cleared it.

"It's clear." Tom said over his COM from within the building. "Let's take a look inside the drop-ship."

Less than a minute later the squad had regrouped and commenced the inspection of the vessel.

"The hatch is locked from inside." Redding said from behind the ship

Sergeant Spielman backed away from the Pelican as he looked it over. Coming around to the front he spotted the hole just above the windshield and called Corporal Redding over.

"Give me a boost onto the nose," he said, gesturing with his thumb at the ship.

Redding obliged and stood next to the Pelican with fingers intertwined into a makeshift stirrup. Using his fellow ODSST's hands

as a step, Spielman clambered onto the drop-ship and slithered to the window accompanied by the scraping sounds of metal rubbing on metal. Clicking on a light attached to his helmet, the ODST peered into the vessel and nearly lost his grip. The scene through the glass looked like something out of a low-budget horror film. Severed, mangled limbs were strewn about the interior with aplomb and entrails hung from seats and equipment like cooked spaghetti.

Tom switched off the light but the visceral image was burned into his memory and reappeared in gruesome detail with each blink of his eyes. As he slid off the Pelican he knew the memory would fade in time. They always did.

"Someone or some_thing_ must have hammered through the hull," he began as the ODST unit gathered for a report, "Then whoever did the hammering just dropped a grenade through and left the universe with three or four less rebels."

"Sir," Private James Wilson asked, "How would one go about 'hammering through' the hull of a Pelican?"

Tom Shrugged, "I'm not sure, I'm not convinced it was a friendly unit that did it, either. From what I can gather, the rebels in that ship came on some sort of scavenger mission after the fighting was done, ONI has a lot of technology that people would love to get their hands on. Something spooked them bad enough that they left their buggy here and went back to the ship."

Private Stephen Mazlow chimed in, "Spartans?"

The sergeant shook his head, "Not likely. If a Spartan happened upon a group of rebels he wouldn't chase them back to their ship, he'd just put a bullet in each head and be done with it. The one thing I'm sure of is there are about a hundred scientists in a bunker at the bottom of this facility and every minute we spend out here is another minute whatever did this," he gestured to the Pelican, "has to find them. So here's the plan. Corporal Redding, you take Private Wilson and search the even-numbered floors, Private Mazlow and I will take the odd numbered floors. When you find something you seek cover and contact us, I don't care if it is a scientist or an Elite, do not engage until we are all together. Everyone got it?"

Three armored heads nodded in unison.

"Let's move out."

The elite squad moved as one entity into the security building. Stairs were preferable to elevators due to their open nature, but a heavy concrete slab blocked the only flight descending to lower levels of the facility. With no other choice, the ODSTs filed into the elevator and dropped one floor down. The blast that had released the biological agent also disabled every security light in the compound. Night vision was switched on as the soldiers cautiously stepped out of the metal box and scanned the hallway with rifles raised. It wasn't the green, scratchy night vision of the past, the technology built into the ODST's helmets sent out a pulse, much like a bat flying at night, and returned the geometry out to one-hundred meters.

The software updated the image over three hundred times a second and

any ambient light was captured and helped process colors. The pulse was even sensitive enough to discern individual wrinkles on a face and textures on a wall. The ODST's had learned the ins and outs of the equipment in training, all they really cared about right now was that it worked as advertised and they could see threats clearly in the inky darkness.

Satisfied the hallway was clear, Redding and Wilson slipped silently through a windowed door, descended two flights of stairs, and emerged on the second floor. Spielman and Mazlow continued down the corridor on the first level far enough apart that a single grenade wouldn't take out both of them, but still close enough to discern hand signals. At each intersection the point man would kneel and peek around the corner while the second soldier provided cover. Windows and doors leading to an assortment of labs and offices were cleared in the same manner. Fifteen minutes into their search both COMs came to life with the voice of Corporal Redding.

"_We've got something here."_

Spielman signaled for Mazlow to follow him into a cleared office, the last thing the Sergeant wanted was to be surprised by an enemy while using his COM. Once in position, the ODST knelt and motioned for Mazlow to cover the door, then responded.

"Go ahead, Corporal."

"_It was a Spartan, he went into an office about thirty meters in front of our position. I don't think he saw-"_

Redding was abruptly cut off by the sound of shattering glass followed immediately by the screech of rending metal. The corporal's voice came through the COM again but this time it was only an unearthly scream punctuated by a metallic cacophony of battle-rifle rounds exiting a barrel and impacting MJOLNIR armor. The shriek was truncated by the unmistakable sound of snapped bones but the macabre symphony continued. Through the COM the pair of ODSTs heard a wet smack, a slow gurgle, then silence.

"Second floor. Now!" The sergeant commanded.

Mazlow was the first to zip around the corner but collided with something metal and immovable before taking two steps. Spielman heard the impact of metal on metal and exited with his rifle up and ready; the sight of a Spartan smashing its combat knife through Mazlow's silver visor greeted him. The body instantly went limp and crumbled to the polished floor. Without another thought, the lone ODST's rifle barked, sending a trio of 9.5mm rounds into the Spartan's shoulder, dropping his shields.

Before Spielman could unleash another burst the super-soldier batted the rifle away and easily lifted the ODST by the neck with a single hand. With his free hand the Spartan removed the soldier's helmet, he wanted to see the face of fear before he killed it. To Marauder's surprise, the face was grinning as if it knew something the Spartan didn't.

A brilliant flash of light illuminated the hallway as the grenade in Spielman's hand exploded. Shrapnel tore through armor and soft flesh as the bodies were thrown in opposite directions down the corridor.

When the corpses had finally come to a bloodied stop, silence reigned in the facility once more.

* * *

>From inside the back of a S.W.A.T. van parked outside the Gains Apartment building, detective Brian Kramer watched through video feeds as an elite police unit stacked up outside Ivan Kazlov's residence. He had always wanted to join the city of Hawking's Special Weapons And Tactics squad, but a minor leg injury during his final tour of duty prevented him from meeting the physical requirements. The wound had long since healed but it had done enough damage to keep him off the force.<p><p>

At any rate, it was always a joy to watch the officers in action, but this time, he was sure, there wouldn't be any action to watch. If Kazlov had any intelligence at all he would have long since fled the city and taken any evidence with him. Raiding the rebel's apartment was a long shot, Kramer knew, but as a detective he also knew that even the most absurd searches could yield fruitful results. After a perfectly executed entry and subsequent search, the S.W.A.T. element leader's voice lit up the van's COM.

"_Nothing here, sir, the place is spotless."_

The commander sitting in the van turned to Kramer on a squeaking chair, "Sorry, detective."

Brian dismissed the apology with a wave, "Don't worry about it commander, I didn't expect to find much."

The Shotokan blackbelt clambered out of the van and returned to his waiting car. Hawking's chief of police told him to use any means necessary to track Kazlov down and he was running out of options. Every scrap of information the detective managed to glean on the rebel spook turned into a dead-end. With his mind made up, Kramer pointed his car towards home, if he was going to pass as a rebel then he needed a haircut.

* * *

>Admiral Jennings watched a replay of the ODSST massacre in stunned silence. Even during the second viewing he couldn't believe what he was seeing, yet every gruesome detail was playing before him and the video couldn't lie. A pair of Spartans had butchered the elite squad as if they were mere cattle. Jennings was pulled from his musings as the COM on his desk came to life.<p><p>

"_Admiral, there is a Lieutenant Leiter here to see you."_ The female receptionist said.

"Right, send him in." Jennings replied, thankful for the distraction as he switched off the video.

Half a second later the room seemed to shrink as the six-foot-three frame of Lieutenant Sam Leiter filled the office. "You wanted to see me, sir?" His copper skin, black hair, and dark piercing eyes made woman stare as he walked by and his gravelly voice made them faint.

Admiral Jennings motioned to the chair opposite his desk. "Have a seat, Lieutenant."

The two-hundred and thirty pound officer eased into the chair with surprising grace.

"I have a simple job for you that will garner a nice chunk of hazard pay." Jennings began. "I'm assuming you've seen the footage from the incident on _Ajax_?"

A nod

"Good, I need four Spartans dropped near the facility and you came highly recommended. Be ready by oh' three hundred, you leave as soon as the _UNSC Atlas_ gets back and refuels. Once the Spartans are on the ground you are to stay there until they get back, should be a quick operation."

The Lieutenant stood and snapped a crisp salute. "Yes, sir. I'll be ready."

Leiter exited the office and shut the door, leaving the admiral to think over his plan again. Ever since Radont killed his commanding officer, Jennings had been getting no less than thirty letters a day demanding the Spartan's execution. ONI accountants frowned on simply killing a multi-million dollar soldier, but being killed in action was a whole different story. The admiral was almost certain Radont would die on _Ajax_, when it came to skill, he was average at best compared to his fellow super-soldiers.

Of course there was still the problem of the rouge Spartans to be dealt with. Eliminating a threat of that magnitude would require a Spartan of superior skill, and there were none faster or stronger than Radont's own brother, Gray Fox. Adding Buggy and Legion to the roster was a no-brainer, the quartet of soldiers had fought in so many battles together that they were often considered a single entity when deployed as a unit.

It was this very camaraderie that had the admiral worried. They would not simply stand aside and watch one of their own die, which forced Jennings to have a plan in the event that Radont made it out alive. 'Newly discovered information' could easily be leaked to the media that would turn Sergeant Winfield into a butcher of unarmed civilians and Radont into a bonafide hero.

Either way, he thought, it was a win-win situation.

* * *

>Despite his outward calm, Jason Mathews was growing anxious. It had been four hours since the blast and so far there were no signs of an ONI rescue attempt. The assassin leaned back in his plush chair and stared at the waist-high marble barrier in front of him while only half listening to the conversations around him.<p><p>

"Hey scientist-man," an overweight, red-haired security guard said as he strode up to Matthews, "It's your turn to stand for a while."

Jason didn't bother lifting his eyes from the marble wall, "No

thanks, I'm quite comfortable where I am."

The guard fumed, "I don't recall giving you a choice, now moâ€" "

Matthews shot him a look of pure venom.

"I, umâ€| I'llâ€| I was just joking, man." With fists clenched the guard stormed through the crowd to the opposite side of the room and glared at the assassin through narrowed eyes. Jason would have to keep an eye on that one, embarrassed bullies were prone to making rash decisions and would stop at nothing to redeem their pride.

Having witnessed the spectacle, and satisfied no violence would come of it, the guard at the door returned his attention to the thick glass window that looked into the hall.

"Looks like we're safe now," he turned to address the room, "the Spartans are here."

7. Crossroads

Detective Brian Kramer ran a hand over the eight millimeter stubble that used to be his thick curly hair. Wearing a sleeveless shirt and torn jeans added to the rebel image, and a dragon tattoo on his left arm completed the look. The green tail of the beast started just above Kramer's elbow and wrapped around his thick bicep on the journey up his arm. Hind legs were visible at the shoulder but the body and the pair of wings that stretched down his chest and back were obscured by the white shirt. The head of the dragon peeked from under the collar on the detective's neck. He got the tattoo on a whim during a tour of duty with the UNSC Marine Corps and it had served him well working undercover to break up drug trafficking rings.

All rebel spooks had a network of grunts in the cities they infiltrated, and Hawking was no different. Some rebel tongues could be loosed with a bribe, while the more loyal ones would only start talking after being threatened with violence. The former lived in large houses and expensive apartments; they knew the value of secrets and were paid well to keep them. The latter were usually underpaid but loyal to a cause, they normally hung out in bars, bars like the one Kramer eyed with feigned disinterest from across the street.

Chuck's Tavern had long been rumored to be a gathering place for rebels. The police wouldn't look into it outright though, not in this part of town. The exterior of the establishment was an eyesore, even managing to eclipse the homeliness of the vacant and neglected buildings adjacent to it. White paint that once blanketed the bricks had been turned into a canvas for gang-related graffiti. The formerly proud roof now sagged in a depressing curve towards its foundation from years of harsh winters and untended summers. Moss-covered shingles secured to the roof by rusting nails reinforced the fact that when it came to the aesthetics of the building, the owner was apathetic.

Kramer glanced both ways before crossing the narrow street and almost smiled at the uselessness of the action. Not even so much as a

bicycle ventured into this part of town with power-hungry gangs willing to execute the operators of any vehicle and salvage every last part to fund their terrorism. Had he not been involved in undercover narcotics operations, the detective would have driven his car right up to the tavern out of ignorance and been gunned down immediately upon setting feet to pavement, if not sooner.

Brian grabbed the rusted handle of the tavern's front door, twisted clockwise, and entered. There was no turning back now; this wasn't the type of bar complete strangers stumbled into for a quick drink and pleasant conversation. Everyone under the sagging roof knew he was there for information and if he just turned around and left he wouldn't make it three blocks without being confronted by a rebel. Four pairs of eyes looked up from their drinks to appraise the detective as he crossed the wood floor and sat at the bar on a hard stool.

Chuck, the curly-haired proprietor and bartender of the establishment, never looked up from the thick mug he was cleaning. Rebels may have turned his tavern into an unofficial hang-out, but that didn't mean he knew, or even wanted to know, about their operations. Fights had broken out in the past when strangers walked in and started asking about the wrong people. When the brawls were over and Chuck had told the police everything he knew, he wouldn't be bothered by his conscience at night because he didn't have to lie to the authorities in order to stay out of prison. On more than one occasion as he hid with casual ease behind the bar to wait out yet another fight, he hoped a rebel would torch the building. With the insurance money he could start a respectable diner in a more reputable part of town, something he had always dreamed of doing. From the looks of the man sitting at his bar there would be a brawl today, the second of the week, and this time it might turn out in the stranger's favor. He looked formidable enough and the four rebels seated throughout the open room were regulars and not known for their fighting skills.

"I'm looking for Ivan Kazlov."

Four chairs scraped on the wooden floor as the rebels stood. Kazlov had given them specific instructions: anyone not already a rebel that came looking for him was to be executed immediately. They also had to respect the rules of the bar, which meant luring the stranger outside. A dark-haired rebel sidled up on Kramer's left and slipped onto a stool, another sat to his right while the remaining two stood behind. Chuck disappeared through a swinging door behind the bar to busy himself with the inventory of alcohol.

"What's yer business with Mr. Kazlov?" The rebel to the left asked.

"I'm looking to join your cause," Kramer replied without turning to face the rebel, "I heard he was the guy to talk to."

"Is that right?" He shot a look to his three comrades. "I'll tell you what, why don't you take a walk with us outside, we'll show you where Kazlov is."

"Or," The detective replied, "You could just tell me where I might find him and let me go about my business. I've lived here my entire life, I know my way around Hawking."

Another glance, this one accompanied by a slight nod to one of the standing rebels.

"I'm afraid that ain't gonna happenâ€" "

A hand grabbed Kramer's shoulderâ€"it was time to act. With the reflexes of a frightened cat the detective planted his feet, toppling the bar stool, and delivered a crippling open-handed strike to the left rebel's kidney. He pivoted with lightning quickness on the balls of his feet and delivered the same blow to the rebel on the right. Spinning free of the grip on his shoulder, Brian crouched slightly and extended his hand, palm outward, into the gut of a third rebel. The strike caused the traitor to double over then collapse as he gasped for the breath that was forcibly removed from his lungs. Kramer stepped away from the writhing bodies, waiting for the last rebel to make a move.

The change in the rebel's situation happened so fast that for a few moments all he could do was stand dumbfounded and gawk at his fallen comrades. After gathering his wits he did the only thing he knew how to do when outmatched.

"North," the rebel began, "Kazlov is north of the city awaiting further orders in a safe-house just outside the village of Mesar. He is staying in a villa called Pacifico."

Brian nodded and exited the bar. He had a long drive ahead of him and he needed a smoke.

* * *

>The security guard peering through the window into the hall backed away from the door as the Spartans charged with no intent of stopping. His hand went to the gun holstered at his side but it was a wasted effort, Wolveryne slammed his bulk into the door, releasing it from the hinges and sending it hurtling through the small room. Jason Matthews dove from his chair to the floor behind the waist-high marble wall. The room buzzed with confusion as three super-soldiers entered, confusion turned to horrifying understanding as the Spartans shouldered their battle rifles and began executing scientists and security guards without remorse. <p>Screams filled the room as 9.5mm rounds exited rifle barrels with a metallic staccato and ripped through the heads of the frenzied masses. A pair of security guards attempted to hide behind Jason's marble wall but a trio of bullets found them before they had a chance to duck. Seeing an opportunity to escape the slaughter, Matthews pulled the fresh corpses closer, laid down parallel to the wall, and partially covered himself with the bodies. Three seconds later the last rounds found their targets and the room fell silent.<p>

A moment later Jason heard the sound of Spartan boots circling the perimeter of the room. As they drew near, the mercenary held his breath and hoped the modified soldiers couldn't hear the rhythmic thump of his pounding heart. A soldier stopped at the pile of bodies covering Matthews, an eternity passed as Jason waited with eyes closed for the Spartan to put a three round burst through his skull. Instead, the super-soldier nudged the pile with a boot, grunted, and continued his sweep of the area. Satisfied everything was clear, the Spartans filed out in search of more targets, leaving the room bathed

in eerie silence.

Matthews pushed the bodies off after five minutes of waiting to be sure the butchers had left. He stood and surveyed the carnage, grabbing the marble wall to steady himself. It was not the sight of blood and brain matter that caused him to nearly vomit, it was the smell. During his stint with the UNSC Marines he had seen similar massacres when the Covenant swept through an area, but it was always outside. Cramming a hundred dead bodies with exposed organs into an enclosed space would make anyone sick.

The mercenary began checking for survivors but after seeing the first five victims he knew there would be none. Every body he checked had a tight grouping of bullet holes either in the chest or the head, not one of them needed a second burst of rifle fire to seal their gruesome fate. Jason moved to the center of the room and came to the same conclusion: the Spartan's aim was impeccable. He swore at himself for overlooking the fact that a mutated Spartan might recover quicker from being knocked out by his darts. He had laced the sharp projectiles with enough serum to put one of the soldiers down for half a day, but failed to consider what effects the biological agent would have on that time frame.

Shaking his head to clear the thoughts, he turned to leave but stopped short, near the door was the body of a woman with the unmistakable bulge of pregnancy swelling her abdomen. Matthews moved closer and inspected the body, a three round burst to the chest was the only flaw he could see. It started in his right hand, a tremble that worked its way up his arm and was soon assaulting his legs.

The mercenary's knees buckled next, but when he hit the floor it was solid wood instead of soft carpet. He was a child again, maybe eight years old, kneeling next to his pregnant mother on the wooden floor of their home. A gaping hole exposed bone and sinew in her shoulder as fresh blood darkened a rapidly widening area of her white blouse. The assailant and his gun were lying not ten feet away in the kitchen. His father still held the smoking shotgun that had ended the murderers life but not before the criminal had gotten off a shot of his own. Matthews wanted to help, he wanted to ease the suffering of his mother but he was only a helpless child. Instead, he took her hand and wept.

Jason shook the memory from his mind and he was back on the carpeted floor of the fallout shelter. How many times had this happened? How many times did his actions result in the killing of a mother or a father or a son or a daughter? It was easy to be detached when he didn't witness the actual results of his operations, but sitting below ground with the serene face of a beautiful scientist staring at him with empty eyes forced the walls to come crashing down. He was just as guilty as the ones who pulled the trigger on innocent civilians; he was responsible for every last body in this room.

A muffled voice from the center of the shelter caught Jason's attention. He turned in time to see a pile of bodies moving as if something were burrowing under them. A hand came up from the pile and grouped wildly; Matthews strode over, grabbed the hand, and pulled. From the pile came a scientist gasping for breath, eyes wide behind thick rimmed glasses as he took in the scene about him. Jason's redemption would start here. If he could get this scared scientist off the planet safely then it would be the first step in a new life.

He would do it, he had to do it, if only to prove to himself that it was possible to change.

Matthews crossed his arms on his chest and waited patiently for the scientist to catch his breath. The black-haired survivor turned in a slow circle with mouth hanging open and jumped at the sight of Jason as if he had materialized out of nowhere.

"Youâ€" you'reâ€", " Chris Fisher looked past Matthews and spotted the lifeless body of Melissa Sanchez. "Oh no. No no no no no no no," he said as he ran past the mercenary and knelt beside the corpse.

"Was she your wife?" Jason asked with as much sympathy as he could muster. It was a foreign emotion to him and he feared the words would come off as being cold and uncaring.

"No," the scientist said barely above a whisper. "She was a good friend, one of the few I had here. Now she's dead. Everyone is dead." With head and shoulders slumped he turned and sat with a heavy sigh. "We're next aren't we?"

"No, we are not next," Jason began with a contagious calm, "We are going to walk right out that door, get to the surface, and find a way to call for help."

"Who are you?" Chris asked, still sitting with his head in his hands.

"I'm no scientist," Matthews said, discarding the long white lab coat. "Get up and help me collect some weapons."

The black-haired scientist didn't move. Jason knelt so he was eye-level with the survivor.

"Look, you have two choices, either get up and help me find some weapons so we can get to the surface, or sit here and sulk while I go to the surface myself. Granted, both choices have risk, but which one do you think she," he nodded to the body of Melissa Sanchez, "would want you to do?"

The scientist submitted and the pair searched the room, recovering the four pistols carried by ONI security guards. Jason checked the two he found, the chambers were clean and the barrels free of any foreign objects. The guards hadn't had a chance, or the wits, to get a single shot off. Fisher procured the final two pistols, holding them with fingers off the triggers awaiting a command from the stranger across the room.

Any other day Jason would have laughed at the awkward scientist who had obviously never held a pistol before, let alone shot one. But it wasn't any other day, and the man in the lab coat wasn't just a scientist, he was Jason's redemption. Matthews took two holsters from the corpses of the guards and positioned them so the extra pistols would be stored behind him instead of on his hips. He walked over to where the scientist was standing and stripped the holsters from the remaining guards.

"Put these on," he commanded. "I don't want to carry five pistols around by myself."

Fisher raised his eyebrows, "Five? There were only four security guards."

Jason pulled the silenced pistol from the small of his back and unscrewed the silencer.

"Five."

Chris eyed the stranger curiously as he strapped the holsters around his waist and tightened them. After glancing at Matthews' setup, the scientist loosened the belts and adjusted the holsters to rest on his back. He attempted to slide a pistol into the first holster but missed, tried again, and finally slid it home on the third attempt. The second pistol managed to find the leather holster after only two attempts. Fisher was glad to get the weapons out of his hands, he had never been comfortable around firearms.

After grabbing a flashlight from the corpse of a security guard, Matthews was ready to leave. He took a few steps toward the door but stopped and turned to face Fisher.

"Why aren't we dead?"

The scientist's dark eyebrows came together in confusion. "Because we weren't shot?"

Jason shook his head then elaborated, "A biological agent was released during the attack, which is why the Spartans are killing everyone—the agent altered their amygdale. As soon as that door," Jason pointed to the opening of the room, "was destroyed, why didn't the agent get in here?"

"It is a problem we are working on." Fisher explained, "The agent has an extremely small half-life but it spreads quickly. Five minutes after it mixes with oxygen it's gone without a trace. That is enough time to spread throughout the base, but we were in here for more than four hours so the chemical is long gone by now."

Satisfied, Matthews started toward the opening again but stopped one last time. "What's your name?"

"Fisher. Chris Fisher."

"My name is Jasâ€", " the mercenary stopped, a slight smile curved his lips upward, "Stephen Marioli."

The assassin moved into the darkened hallway with the scientist following close behind.

* * *

>Detective Kramer rolled into Mesar just as the sun was setting behind the tree line for the night. The town, if it could be called that, was little more than a pit stop for travelers going north and south between Hawking and New Falls, or east and west between Franklin and Halldin. The roads intersected dead-center of the settlement and neatly split the town into four quadrants. To the northwest was a gas station and small motel, to the south stood a proud church, and the remaining two quadrants contained a smattering of small log houses. The city was surrounded by a thick forest with

tall menacing trees that made the town seem even smaller than it already was. <p>As Brian came to a squeaky stop in front of the town's only motel he made a mental note to replace the brake pads on his aging car again. It was just more money he would have to sink into a vehicle that was becoming more trouble than it was worth. He didn't mind the labor part, in fact, he rather enjoyed working on cars, but when it started having a significant impact on his detective-salaried budget it was time to go looking for a new one. New to him at any rate, Kramer refused to buy brand new vehicles straight off the lot. He preferred to let them simmer and depreciate for a few years before even considering a purchase. They ran like new anyway after a few weekends of work, he would rather let the more wealthy citizens pay top dollar for their vehicles and maintenance. Brian had often considered leaving the force and working at a garage somewhere, but he feared he might grow to despise working on cars if he was forced to do it day-in and day-out. Few things are more depressing than a passion that has transformed into a burden.<p>

On entering the motel, it seemed to be more akin to a hunting lodge as opposed to a place where weary travelers could stop for a night. It made sense, Kramer thought, the city, with its forested surroundings, was a prime location for a lodge. Stuffed heads of wild game hung on the walls of the foyer and chairs made from logs decorated the lounge where a fire cracked and danced to its own rhythm. The owner of the lodge waited patiently behind a wooden check-in counter. Short, gray hair rested atop his tanned head and he wore a black and red flannel shirt paired with worn blue jeans. 'Lumberjack' came to Kramer's mind as he walked up to the counter. Behind the proud man was a case mounted on the wall displaying an assortment of medals and commendations earned on the battlefield. The shiny badges put the detective at ease knowing he would be talking to a fellow veteran.

"Are all of these yours?" He asked, gesturing to the animal heads mounted on the walls.

"A few are," the man said as a proud smile split his face. "I added to the collection started by my father and grandfather. The bearskin rug by the fireplace is the result of my son's first hunting experience not two miles from here. This lodge has been family owned for three generations now."

"No kidding?" Kramer looked around the room, genuinely impressed.

"I 'spose I'll be passing the baton to the fourth generation soon," he said with only a hint of sadness. "My son is more'n capable to run the place now and it's about time I thought about retiring."

Must be nice, Kramer thought, _maybe fifty years old and ready to retire._

"At any rate," then man continued, "I'm sure you didn't come up here to chat, what can I do for you?"

"I need a room for a few days, and some directions."

"The room I can help you with and I'll try my best with the directions."

"Can you tell me where I might find a villa called Pacifico?"

The owner crossed his arms, "Pacifico, huh? They don't take too kindly to police officers poking around up there."

Brian raised an eyebrow, "How did you know?" _Is it that obvious?_

The older man chuckled, "The only people that ever ask how to get there are cops. What you want to do," he said as he leaned an elbow on the counter and pointed, "is go to the center of town and take the northern road out. A little over a mile down that road you'll see a gated driveway and a large house, that's your villa. Course, I wouldn't go knocking on that door 'til mornin' if I was you." The owner turned and procured a key attached to a steel ring from a slot on the wall.

Brian handed over a few bills, "Actually," he said as he took the key, "I was hoping I wouldn't be spotted at all." Kramer winked.

"Ah, well in that case the darkness suits you. Good hunting."

Brian nodded his thanks, picked up his bag, and headed down a short hallway to room five. It was a small room with a single bed but it would serve his purpose admirably. All the furniture, including the bed, looked like it was hand made from logs gathered in the surrounding forest. It was apparent that the owner, and the generations of his family that preceded him, took pride in the establishment they had crafted. The room had a 'lived-in' feel to it without seeming worn out and unkempt. It was a feat only achieved in small businesses owned by generations of the same family; though, large hotel chains had often attempted, and failed, to replicate it. Brian had to admire a place like this. As a sixth generation police officer, he bemoaned the lack of knowledge being passed down from parents to children.

Kramer quickly changed into dark green camouflage and secured a silenced pistol to his thigh. Next, he took three small tracking bugs and slipped them into a chest pocket on his black Kevlar vest. After donning a pair of night vision goggles and resting them on his forehead, Kramer opened his door and glanced into the hallway. All clear. From the corridor he slipped out the back door, crossed a small yard lit by electric lamps, and disappeared into the forest.

Once under cover of the foliage he pulled the NVGs over his eyes and headed east towards the northbound road. Kramer spotted the pavement after one-hundred-and-fifty meters and turned, still under the cover of the trees, to follow the road north. It was slow-going, the detective darted from tree to tree keeping an eye out for any sentries that might be patrolling the woods. Half an hour later Kramer arrived at the vine-covered outer wall of the villa without incident. The forest truncated five meters from the wall making it easy to approach undetected, but at the same time disrupting any long-range surveillance that could be conducted on the ground from just inside the tree line. Brian crossed the small opening and scaled the wall using the vines, poking his head over just enough to scan the yard for threats. The expanse of grass was empty and the only lights came from the front of the three-story building.

After crawling over the barrier Kramer dashed through the darkness and pressed his back to the wall. To his left was the front of the house and the quickest way into the garage. It also had lights illuminating the front courtyard, which wasn't a big problem due to the lack of patrols on the outside. The biggest problem was locked doors, Brian didn't know the first thing about picking them and he certainly didn't have a key. His only hope was that a back door had been left unlocked by a careless guard. Kramer crept towards the rear of the house.

Upon rounding the corner the first thing to snare his attention was a balcony jutting from the house with a railing made from blackened twisted steel running along the perimeter. The room beyond the vacant balcony was dark and the glass door had been left open to let in a breeze. Beneath the balcony was a non-descript wooden door; Brian tried the handleâ€"locked. He backed away and looked again to the balcony and open door then eyed the wall, measured a rough angle in his head, and sprinted towards the villa. Detective Kramer planted a foot on the wall and launched himself toward the balcony, managing to snag the bottom and swing like a pendulum until gravity caught up with his act of defiance. From there he grasped the twisted steel bars of the railing and shimmed up until he could clamber over the edge.

Brian moved in a crouch into what turned out to be a large unoccupied bedroom. After skirting the edge of the bed and creeping up to the door he lifted the night vision goggles to his foreheadâ€"there was light spilling under the door. Kramer cracked the door open and peered out into a well-lit hallway with a door flanking each side. The operative eased open the barrier and stepped onto the plush carpet, relieved that he had something silent to walk on. The hallway ended in stairs, which he descended into a large foyer. To the left was a broad opening to a spotless kitchen, from the right, behind a closed door, came the sounds of a television broadcasting some sort of sporting event. The floor was crafted from hardwood and polished to a glistening sheen.

Across the foyer was another door, Brian sneaked up, cracked it open, and peeked through. Beyond was the garage, which housed two vehicles: a black SUV and a small sports car. Kramer crept through the door and shut it; he approached the sports car first, crawling under the red vehicle to plant a tracking bug. After affixing the device into a hard-to-see crevice of the engine, Brian slid from underneath the car. As he was rounding the front to bug the SUV the garage door swung open. The detective ducked as a rebel guard entered and walked behind the vehicles to access a large steel toolbox.

Kramer slipped around the edge of the car and started to creep up behind the rebel as he rummaged through the toolbox. _Don't turn around, all I ask is you don't turn around, just keep looking for your tool._ The detective eased his silenced pistol from the holster and pointed it at the rebel's back. The door swung open again and a second rebel entered.

"Hey, Craig, Ivan wantsâ€", "

The rebel stopped mid-sentence when he saw what looked like a special operations soldier pointing a silenced pistol at a fellow rebel. Brian pivoted and aimed at the new threat, the rebel dove behind the sports car, a wrench came crashing down on the detective's pistol.

The rebel swung again, this time Kramer sidestepped, pushing his back against the door of the SUV as the steel wrench zipped past, coming within an inch of his skull. He knelt to scoop up the pistol but the rebel kicked it under the car and swung a third time. Brian ducked. _Fine, I'll play it your way._ With mounting frustration he delivered two lightening quick strikes to the rebel's face. The attack happened so quickly and with so little warning, the rebel felt the blows all the way down his spine as he stumbled backwards and smacked his head on the toolbox. _That should put him out long enough to_â€". Kramer turned and was greeted by the butt of a pistol slamming into the side of his head. The detective spun, staggered, and collapsed to the cold concrete. His surroundings faded into darkness as the image of approaching boots echoed through his mind.

End
file.